

# Technical Rhetorics and Reproductive Justice, Reproductive Rights, and Reproductive Health

**Melissa Stone,**

*North Carolina State University*

**& Zachary Beare,**

*North Carolina State University*

---

---

*“An RJ-informed model of rhetorical analysis, thus, actively seeks out objects of study that lie outside dominant legal and institutional contexts. By engaging with artifacts from the margin, rhetorical scholarship can mount more poignant critiques on oppressive networks of power, and further illuminate possibilities for coalition across different social movements.”*

—Shui-yin Sharon Yam, 2020

We begin this statement by reflecting on some of the rhetorical and political decisions we made in composing our infographic. As teachers of rhetoric, multimodal composition, and technical writing, we feel it is necessary to account for the choices we have made and to share our intentions in creating this infographic. We hope this reflection will both guide readers through the features of that text and also surface some of the key challenges inherent in this

critical-creative project. Perhaps the biggest challenge was deciding what to call our infographic project. While we considered using the phrase “rhetorical interventions in reproductive justice,” we settled on the language of “technical rhetorics” (Frost & Elbe, 2015) for a number of reasons. Frost and Elbe explain that “technical rhetorics are those rhetorics that communicate specialized information or knowledge in a persuasive way” (2015, para.8.). Because discourses of reproductive justice intersect with highly technical domains of medicine and law, this definition has special resonance. As Frost and Elbe (2015) argue, emphasizing the rhetorical and persuasive nature of technical material actively resists the tendency to treat such material as neutral, objective, and true (a treatment especially common with discourses of health and medicine). The language of “technical rhetorics” reminds us that technical material is always crafted, and that it does rhetorical work within and across contexts. We also appreciate that Frost and Elbe (2015) use their term to emphasize application and praxis, highlighting the concept of *techné* embedded in the term. This is important to our project because we want our infographic to showcase opportunities for both analytical work and rhetorical action. That is, we want to showcase how technical rhetorics offer potential for scholarly work and for the work of public, civic, and political engagement.

To be honest, we felt some anxiety about working in the genre of the infographic. They can be somewhat blunt, decontextualized rhetorical artifacts. After all, Christopher Toth (2013) explains that infographics are meant to be “stand-alone communication” that allow an audience to comprehend the information presented without the support of supplemental materials (448). This is a troublingly tall order for this specific project considering the complexities of *reproductive justice* (RJ) and its connections to related terms like *reproductive rights* (RR) and *reproductive health* (RH). Each domain could certainly have its own infographic that might chart its specific histories, motivations, research areas, and opportunities for rhetorical action. That said, we understand a pragmatic value in attempting to delineate these three political traditions in an infographic form, we see the potential pedagogical value of it, and we appreciate the creative challenge.

Scholarly and popular discussions of *reproductive justice* often locate the origin of the term with SisterSong, a collective of sixteen organizations of women of color founded in 1997 (Gurr 2015; Mamo 2018; Nixon 2013; Price 2010). Silliman et al. (2004) further emphasize the importance of considering the history of reproductive health organizations founded by women of color that pre-date and became founding members of the SisterSong collective. Thus, we recommend that this infographic be presented alongside the work of activist and community organizations. Based on the important work of these public-facing activist groups and organizations, this keywords statement and accompanying infographic highlight how technical rhetorics provides a valuable lens for assessing and intervening in the political work of RJ, RR, and RH.

The second part of our infographic, “Technical Rhetorics Scholarship on RJ, RR, and RH,” provides suggestions for scholarship that illustrates the research domains presented in the first half. The scholarship we have highlighted is not meant to be exhaustive in any way; it merely represents a starting point for individuals interested in various areas of technical rhetorics highlighted above and includes scholarship we have found useful in our own research and teaching. With its focus on technical rhetorics and reproductive justice, the scholarship included on the infographic has a narrower focus than the “Annotated Bibliography on Rhetorics of Reproductive Justice” that appears in this special issue, but we see it as complementing that bibliography as well as complementing the incredible work exhibited by the articles in this issue. We have placed an asterisk beside each text that focuses on the methodological practices within feminist rhetorical studies and reproductive justice. These pieces in particular are important to highlight because they provide tangible examples of how different technical rhetorics approaches can be applied within reproductive justice projects. Including this list of scholarship is also important because the infographic is meant to be usable as a stand-alone text that can function outside this special issue and away from the annotated bibliography.

It is our hope that the infographic be used as a pedagogical tool in college and university classrooms that take up topics of RJ, RR, and RH at the intersection of technical rhetorics. Parsing through

the distinct definitions and intricacies of these three terms can be difficult for students and educators alike. In light of this, we want this infographic to provide some clarification to encourage continued critical rhetorical projects that engage with, contribute to, and critique discourses of RJ, RR, and RH. We focus on how researchers in technical rhetorics disciplines can critically intervene in RH, RR, and RJ scholarship with an attention toward inclusivity and intersectionality. This infographic is organized as such to (1) highlight the entangled relationship of these three domains; (2) exhibit research suggestions for each area; and (3) showcase opportunities for rhetorical action in projects that take up RJ, RR, or RH.

While our infographic delineates avenues of scholarly research and rhetorical action within RH, RR, and RJ as separate domains, we acknowledge the ways they intersect and overlap. For instance, issues of RH are often mediated through governmental laws and policies—rhetorical forces that might more often be associated with RR. And though we separate these three interconnected areas, we see the work we highlight in each section as being informed by an ethos of reproductive justice. As an illustration of why this is important, much of the discourse surrounding RH and RR positions medical establishments as neutral forces which *would* provide care if not encumbered by conservative legislature.

A reproductive-justice focused technical rhetorics approach can highlight how this is not always the case and how discursive infrastructures, rhetorical choices, and communication practices associated with RH and RJ are often exclusionary and lead to disparities in access, voice, and care quality. In this way, a technical rhetorics approach can work in concert with discourses of RJ which have taken a much more critical and historically-informed look at the medical establishment by considering all the ways that legal systems, as apparatuses of the State, have often been used to oppress marginalized populations. Consequently, marginalized populations might be resistant to mainstream RR and RH discourses that position legal rights as the ultimate goal and form of protection. Gurr (2015), for instance, showcases how the State has been a force that has threatened reproductive justice for indigenous women; moreover, according to Yam (2020), a RJ-informed model of rhetorical analysis

should center on the lived experiences, knowledges, and rhetorical practices of those who are excluded from dominant narratives of reproductive health and rights.

We believe that discourses of RJ, both those produced by community organizations and by scholars working to theorize the movement, should be varied, continue to evolve to incorporate and address the concerns of additional communities, and should consciously rethink the purview and strategies of the movement. Considering a RJ-informed rhetorical project through a queer perspective is just one such way to do this kind of work.

In our own review of the literature and organizations focused on RJ, we were struck by how much of the language of this discourse still positions RJ as a “woman’s issue.” While we understand pragmatic reasons for this, and have also faced this challenge in composing our own review and infographic, it is a linguistic and rhetorical choice that may well be exclusionary to queer folks who have fraught relationships with the identity category of “woman,” especially in relation to its history in discourses of RH and RR. A queering of RJ, then, has the possibility of furthering much of the important work that the movement has already done to attend to bodily autonomy, different ways of conceiving children or becoming a parent, ideas about who can and cannot have children, and to center sexual pleasure without reproductive intent. In highlighting scholarship and avenues of rhetorical action, we have tried to center work attending to queer perspectives in each of the domains of RR, RH, RJ. We argue that, in much the same way that the RJ movement began by critiquing the discursive and political strategies of the RH and RR movements, it is well suited for the self-reflexive work necessary to continue to both develop and reframe its approaches, and to strive for ethical and inclusive relations.

## REFERENCES

- Frost, Erin A., and Michelle F Eble. 2015. "Technical Rhetorics: Making Specialized Persuasion Apparent to Public Audiences." *Present Tense* 4, no. 2. Accessed May 1 2020. <https://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-4/technical-rhetorics-making-specialized-persuasion-apparent-to-public-audiences/>
- Gurr, Barbara. 2015. *Reproductive Justice: The Politics of Health Care for Native American Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Mamo, Laura. 2018. "Queering Reproduction in Transnational Bio-Economies." *Reproductive BioMedicine and Society Online* 7: 24-32.
- Nixon, Laura. 2013. "The Right to (Trans) Parent: A Reproductive Justice Approach to Reproductive Rights, Fertility, and Family-Building Issues Facing Transgender People." *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice* 20, no. 1: 73-103.
- Price, Kimala. 2010. "What Is Reproductive Justice? How Women of Color Activists Are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm." *Meridians: Feminisms, Race, Transnationalism* 10, no. 2: 42-65.
- Silliman, Jael, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutierrez. 2004. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Toth, Christopher. 2013. "Revisiting a Genre: Teaching Infographics in Business and Professional Communication Courses." *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 4: 446-457.
- Yam, Shui-yin Sharon. 2020. "Visualizing Birth Stories from the Margin: Toward a Reproductive Justice model of Rhetorical Analysis." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 50, no. 1: 19-34.

**Melissa Stone** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communication, Rhetoric & Digital Media (CRDM) program at North Carolina State University. Her research focuses on material feminist rhetorics, and on the quotidian use and practice of reproductive healthcare technologies. Her in-progress dissertation project aims to create a foundation for menstrual healthcare rhetorics given that this specific focus has not yet received the same kind of attention that other aspects of reproductive healthcare have in feminist rhetorics of health and medicine. She is also interested in the theory and practice of rhetoric & composition and technical & professional writing pedagogies. Stone's work has appeared in *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition* and in *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*.

**Zachary Beare** is an assistant professor of English, the associate director of first-year writing, and a core faculty member of the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at North Carolina State University. His research and teaching focus on composition pedagogy, queer and feminist rhetorics, affect and emotion, and digital culture. He is especially interested in how negative affects like shame, embarrassment, and anxiety shape rhetorical activity and are operationalized for rhetorical effect. His work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, the *Journal of Cultural Research*, *Writing on the Edge*, and in various edited collections.