

Reproductive Justice in the Classics Classroom

In the current political climate, many instructors do not feel comfortable facilitating conversations around difficult topics in the classroom. In particular, issues like abortion may feel too complex and polarizing for instructors to feel comfortable broaching the topic. However, we also know that some of these “hot button” topics are not only relevant to our courses but also necessary to include in our instruction in order to give our students an accurate, complete picture of the ancient world. Not only are questions around reproduction and female bodies central to any historical study of the ancient world, but the history of the field of classics is also complicit in efforts (in the United States and elsewhere) to control the fertility and bodies of people of color. At a time when Alabama has been in the news for recent legislation around abortion access, this workshop will use current events as an opportunity to have a dialogue around how classics interacts with the current political moment and how that may impact discussions in our classics classrooms.

This workshop brings together academics and student activists from Birmingham who have been a part of the fight for reproductive justice in Alabama, in the face of increasingly restrictive abortion laws in that state. The workshop aims to open up a discussion between students, activists, and instructors to explore how we can best teach around questions of reproductive justice, including but not limited to abortion. Instead of simply focusing on abortion, this workshop will address reproductive justice more broadly. Our framing for this workshop draws on the framework first established by the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice and SisterSong, two organizations founded and led by women of color with the expressed intention of forming a movement that decentered the experiences of white women when advocating for personal bodily autonomy and the right to freely plan one’s own family.

This workshop, then, brings together stakeholders who have an interest in just and equitable discussions in the classroom dealing with the central concerns of the reproductive justice movement. In particular, we will be focusing on what these discussions might look like in the classics classroom. Each workshop presenter will speak briefly about their own perspective – in addition to student activists, presenters will include classics instructors with expertise in pedagogy and experience teaching about reproduction in the ancient world.

Topics of discussion will include:

- Case studies of difficult reproductive justice topics that can arise in classics classes
- What reproductive justice activists wish instructors knew
- How to turn difficult topics into teachable moments
- Strategies for precarious faculty to protect their jobs while also maintaining a focus on reproductive justice
- Examples of class units that invite discussions around reproductive justice
- Discussion of the historical connections between the use of classical antiquity and eugenics movements in the United States

This workshop will take seriously the insistences of Loretta Ross (co-founder and first National Coordinator of the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective) that discussions around reproductive justice “not focus on what happened to women of color, but what women of color did for themselves” (Part of the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, this quote is part of transcript of an oral history interview with Loretta Ross which can be found here:

<https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/vof/transcripts/Ross.pdf>) and while we will discuss

eugenics and forced sterilization, this panel will be careful to do so from a perspective that does

not erase the history of activism and self-advocacy of women of color, particularly those in the American South.