



Fifth Biennial Women's Network Symposium
University of Debrecen, Hungary
March 31-April 1, 2023

Call for papers

The Women's Network of the European Association for American Studies invites contributions to the interdisciplinary symposium

Access to Equality: Reproductive Justice in the United States

The origins of the American democratic project are rooted in a theory that juxtaposes freed men and enslaved people. The Enlightenment theorized the rights of free men and their access to what was conceived of as natural rights, and the Declaration of Independence refers to these as inalienable rights. We know that these rights were not intended to include Indigenous people, women, people of color, and the working classes as one had to be propertied in order to vote; most men of color were denied citizenship, not to mention most claims to manhood, and white, upper- and middle-class women were held up as “Republican Mothers” at the same time that their legal rights placed them more on equal footing with chattel than it did with their masculine counterparts. Slowly, these barriers have been challenged in every arena of American life. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, greater access to equality and representation has meant that marginalized groups have greater claims to “natural rights” than they had in the past, but current legal, political, social, and economic trends seem to indicate that these very inalienable, unassailable rights were never truly meant to be extended to these groups. This conference intends to take up the idea of American democracy and the ways in which reproductive work and roles that women, trans individuals, and non-binary people perform have ultimately served to undermine their claims to liberty and autonomy.

Within the historical context of women's rights movements, the recent Supreme Court's decision on *Dobbs* makes this questioning all the more glaring and relevant as it is an example of the highest judicial institution in the land revoking rights that had once been extended to women. The irony in the majority opinion is that each state's representatives would better reflect the will of the electorate, giving the state powers that had previously been granted to the individual. The question of whether those identified as women have access to inalienable rights has been evoked since the inception of the women's rights movement when the Seneca Falls convention issued *The Declaration of Sentiments* in 1848. Unfortunately, the question of reproductive work and women's, trans individuals', and non-binary people's reproductive capacities has not been given sufficient attention in discussions over their liberties and autonomy and thus how they fit into the national narrative on inalienable rights.

Yet, the division over and within the pregnant body, pitting the rights of others over women's, non-binary people's, and trans individuals' bodies and the rights of the fetus over that of the pregnant person's, can be extended all the way back to

enslaved women. Historian Dorothy Roberts puts forward that “the first example of maternal-fetal conflict in American history” can be found in the way that slaveholders in the South forced enslaved pregnant women to lie down with their bellies in a hole so as to protect the fetus all the while exposing their bodies for corporal punishment.¹ When the history of the birth control movement is taken into account, the very fact that it is understood as liberatory for white, affluent women, while as a means of population control, and potentially racial genocide, for women, trans, and non-binary individuals, people of color, and women of low socio-economic status, as a way for the state to address social problems like poverty,² we can better see how integral reproductive autonomy is to the question of women's, non-binary individuals, and trans people's rights and their full liberty in the American context. Even during the *Roe* years, women and pregnant people were arrested for endangering a fetus's life when they used drugs while pregnant or were reported for miscarrying because hospital staff suspected the birthers of doing something to harm the fetus while they were pregnant.³ The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers has since the *Dobbs* decision already decried the possibility of the over-criminalization of pregnancy loss as the rights of women, trans folks, and non-binary people are pitted against those of the fetus in a post-*Roe* world.

Reproductive justice, “the human right not to have a child, but also the right to have children and raise them with dignity in safe, healthy, and supportive environments,”⁴ seems the only means to reconcile reproductive work and roles performed by women, trans individuals, and non-binary people with their liberty and autonomy. Without such a framework, the undoing of reproductive rights questions women's, non-binary people's, and trans individuals' equality and begs the question as to whether they are seen as inheritors of the nation's promise to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

We encourage paper proposals that examine reproductive justice and democracy as it pertains to American women, trans individuals, and non-binary people throughout all periods of American history represented in a wide range of academic fields such as, for example, social studies, visual culture and media studies, literature, linguistics, law, and medical humanities. Possible lines of inquiry could include:

- Reproductive justice as reproductive freedom, health equity, and racial justice
- The American imaginary: “strong men and domesticated women”
- Illiberalism and its consequence on reproductive rights
- The undoing of rights as a questioning of women's, trans people's, and non-binary individuals' rights and autonomy writ large
- Reproductive justice as access to reproductive rights, access to LGBTQI+ and racialized identities

¹ Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 14.

² See Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, ch. 2 for further information on these claims.

³ Hodges, Lauren, “As *Roe* Falls, Criminal Defense Lawyers Sound the Alarm about Mass Incarceration.” *NPR*, June 24, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/16/1105291030/scotus-roe-v-wade-abortion-law>; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, xii-xiii.

⁴ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, xix.



- Cultural silencing of trans individuals' and non-binary people's pregnant bodies and birthing experiences
- The Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive justice
- *Roe v. Wade*: before, during, and after
- The repercussions of US reproductive rights legislation in Europe
- The birth control movement
- Sterilization: choice and coercion
- Reproductive technologies: medically assisted pregnancy, surrogacy
- Divisions between maternal/pregnant person-fetal rights
- Reproductive restrictions' consequences on im/migration
- Delimiting radical spaces so intellectual labor on reproductive justice spans across socio-political positions of women and LGBTQI+ activists and theorists

Please submit proposals of up to 250 words, together with a bio of approximately 100 words, by **November 15, 2022** to eaaswomensnetwork@gmail.com. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out at the beginning of December. The symposium is planned as a hybrid event, with both in-person and online attendance possible.

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