

REVIEW

Complicating Reproductive Agents: Material Feminist Challenges to Reproductive Rhetorics

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Jensen, Robin E. *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term*. Penn State UP, 2016.

Koerber, Amy. *From Hysteria to Hormones: A Rhetorical History*. Penn State UP, 2018.

Fixmer-Oraiz, Natalie. *Homeland Maternity: US Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime*. U of Illinois P, 2019.

As illustrated by the titles under consideration, feminist rhetoricians have turned to the material, attempting to understand the complex material and discursive realities of individuals identified as women. This move has led feminist rhetoricians to extend their purview beyond studies of women's words and actions to interrogate rhetorical gendering writ large. As Sarah Hallenbeck discusses, this shift calls scholars to reexamine the framing of "women-as-rhetors toward a broader, more descriptive project that interrogates *all* the ways that rhetoric alternately supports, complicates, and subverts dominant understandings of gender" (13). Similarly, Jordynn Jack invites scholars to approach rhetorics of bodies, space, dress, and time "as an integrated system that produces gender difference" (288). Focusing on the material-discursive realities of individual lives allows for feminist scholars to identify the many ways social and physical realities impact women's rhetorical capacity more clearly. As Michelle Smith writes, "we might see the move toward rhetorics of gendering as feminist rhetoric's answer to the material turn" (520).

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One way that feminist scholars have begun to analyze gendered rhetorics is through exploration of the rhetorics around reproduction. Lindal Buchanan's scholarship is exemplary of this new body of research. Taken together, her monographs *Regendering Delivery* (2005) and *Rhetorics of Motherhood* (2013) address the inherent connection between rhetorical capacity and the material reality of the reproductive body. In *Regendering Delivery*, Buchanan argues that "the ideological components of delivery, a canon traditionally perceived as exclusively material in focus, become apparent only when we consider it from the vantage point of differently located and previously marginalized speakers" (69). With this argument, she opens the door for other feminist scholars to examine the intersection of material reality and identity. Buchanan speaks more explicitly about women's reproductive role in *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, observing that the maternal body is a contested one that creates a "slippery rhetorical terrain for women" (xvii). Within these texts, Buchanan calls for feminist scholars to further explore the material and discursive realities of particularly situated speakers, specifically speakers in marginalized groups. The monographs reviewed here take up this call.

The three texts under review join the expanding discipline of reproductive rhetoric that has emerged from the material turn in feminist rhetoric. Robin E. Jensen's 2016 *Infertility* traces how scientific and popular definitions of infertility have emerged alongside historical moments in a kairotic manner. Amy Koerber's 2018 *From Hysteria to Hormones: A Rhetorical History* wields a topological approach to understanding the shift from the hysterical woman to the hormonal woman and the resulting implications for widespread beliefs about women's mental capacity. Finally, Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz's 2019 *Homeland Maternity* discusses reproduction within US security culture and how motherhood has been resituated to affirm the security and power of the state. Each of these monographs contextualizes discourses about the reproductive body across a variety of texts and genres—scientific journals, film and tv programs, news reports, patient diaries, practitioner journals, and other archival materials. Given the necessity of engaging with multiple fields of study to fully understand the complexities of reproductive rhetoric, these projects are transdisciplinary. They draw not only from feminist rhetorics but also from the rhetorics of health and medicine to examine the complex intersections of culture, identity, and a woman's reproductive state and capacities. Each of the texts builds upon each other—in fact, the authors cite each other frequently—to shift understandings of the body away from the house of language to a dwelling that incorporates material and social conditions as well. Presented together, these three monographs offer insight into the emergent discourses surrounding women's reproductive roles and capacities. Additionally, the texts address the social moments from which these discourses emerge, necessitating a material and discursive analysis.

In this way, Jensen, Koerber, and Fixmer-Oraiz join Buchanan to extend the connection between reproductive rhetoric and recent work in feminist rhetoric. They work to understand how reproductive bodies are impacted both by their material realities and by the language used to describe their bodies. Put another way, and as I explore below, each of these texts take up the call of the material turn in feminist rhetoric.

More specifically, each author raises questions about how academic scholarship and popular discourse have historically examined the gendered body, tracing these themes through metaphor, through action, and through choice. In doing so, they challenge conceptions of agency in feminist rhetorical scholarship. As these texts illustrate, the roadblocks to bodily agency for women are manifold and deeply embedded within the sociocultural and historical moments the authors discuss. Still, in many ways, the historical discourses used to determine a woman's power or autonomy over her reproductive capacity often falter or fail to challenge the larger structures that impact women's reproductive roles and experiences. By better understanding material-discursive discourses about the reproductive body, feminist, scientific, and rhetorical scholars more broadly can employ different modes of accessing the present reproductive landscape, and in doing so, seek greater reproductive justice.

METAPHORICAL BODIES AND JENSEN'S *INFERTILITY*

One notable reproductive discourse that is challenged within reproductive rhetoric is in making metaphors of the female body. As exemplified in Robin E. Jensen's *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term*, when we lose the origins of these metaphors, they maintain power over the body. Metaphors and language about women's reproductive bodies are pervasive, but additionally develop alongside specific, kairotic moments. That is, they are carried not solely and abstractly through a decontextualized repeated use, but through the emergence of specific, material, and social events. In this vein, Jensen's monograph uses kairology to consider how "infertility has been defined in and across technical, mainstream, and lay communities. . . . [A]nd how different, emergent conceptualizations of infertility have had implications for individuals and the societies in which they live" (3). Jensen analyzes speeches, medical documents, and manifestos from clinics, laboratories, correspondence, and popular media coverage. The variety of primary sources analyzed in the monograph provide clues about the larger rhetorical ecology of infertility through a methodology of critical rhetorical orientation, which seeks to place fragments of a discourse in conversation with each other. By demonstrating how discourses interact, *Infertil-*

ity traces how these metaphors—fertility, sterility, vitality—and understandings don’t die out or develop chronologically but resurface in interesting ways.

To this end, *Infertility* analyzes the discourses around reproductive bodies chronologically—from early historical discussion of infertility to clinical times. Each chapter highlights how women’s (in)fertility is continually positioned in the middle of a conflict between the natural and scientific understandings of the body, regardless of the time period. The dominant metaphors that emerged were fertility and sterility, the former embodying the assumptions of the female body as a natural, wild thing and the latter exemplifying later thought of technological and scientific control of the body. Even reproduction is a metaphor that signals birth as a manufacturing process (28). There were still other metaphors for fertility that emerged—vital energy, chemical agents, and fears of castration anxiety. Importantly, these metaphors do not exist in vacuums but instead act upon each other and in accordance with the time period. Jensen “speaks to the diverse ways that arguments, appeals, and narratives come to be, circulating *and* percolating, flowing *and* repeating” (167).

There are, of course, notable emphases and omissions in this account. Jensen is, for example, focused primarily on the (in)fertility experiences of wedded, middle class, white women. This concern is, as she claims, largely because the documentation of fertility by scientific institutions has almost entirely left out the experiences of low-income women, single women, queer women, and women of color. The focus on white women is because infertility tends to foster a “‘stratified reproduction’ in which members of some demographic groups are encouraged to reproduce and others are not” (7). However, Jensen does note that the metaphors of infertility were not applied to all women equally. For example, vital energy metaphors of the early 1900s were decidedly racist. Women of color have “naturally endured no cognitive growth and thus required little to no additional energy,” whereas higher order thinking limited white women’s reproduction (45). Therefore, women of color did not have problems with fertility, according to the medical establishment. Jensen leaves readers with the imagining of a new type of (in)fertility rhetoric that calls for the inclusion of raced and classed discourses.

Among the many contributions of this text, one central theme of *Infertility* is how metaphorizing the body poses limits to the concept of agency. Jensen’s historical tracing shows that metaphors “that highlight individual women’s agency in establishing fertility and those that frame medical intervention as determinant” were pervasive and damaging (3). In either case, women were positioned as having agency over their bodily functions when they did not. Throughout the text, Jensen highlights the scientific communities’ insistence that women’s immaturity, dedication to academic endeavors, misuse of energy,

psychosocial development, general irritability, and more were responsible for their infertility. These metaphors allowed dominant structures of power, such as the medical institution, to resituate blame on women for their inability to reproduce. Agency, in this conception, is something women are told they have despite material limits to and on their bodies. It is not an actual ability to act, but the perceived ability to act.

POWERFUL/LESS ACTION AND *FROM HYSTERIA TO HORMONES*

Amy Koerber's *From Hysteria to Hormones: A Rhetorical History* challenges discourses about action and the reproductive body by tracking the transition from the hysterical to the hormonal woman chronologically, working to disrupt the notion that one understanding of the reproductive body simply replaced the other. Koerber's monograph argues that "the discovery of hormones was not so much a revolution as an exigency that required old ways of thinking about women's bodies to be twisted, reshaped, and transformed" to match popular and scientific communities' demands that medical practices be based in science (xiii). Though this may seem like a positive thing, as Koerber shows, the linear scientific history this assumption created has miscategorized the shift from hysterical to hormonal. Instead, ancient ideas about hysterical women have emerged in scientific understandings of hormones.

One accomplishment of Koerber's work is the use of multiple methodological techniques and disciplines to complicate the shift from hysterical to hormonal. The text engages specifically with feminist rhetorical scholarship, echoing Michelle Ballif's challenge for historiographies to account for the ways "'history' is always already 'out of joint'" (7). The text also speaks to rhetorical science studies and uses these frameworks to examine lectures; archives from the National Endocrine Society and Harvard's Countway Library of Medicine; and digital collections of photographs, patient charts, and handwritten notes. To analyze these sources, Koerber employs a topological view of time to capture the long history through which the hysterical woman became the hormonal woman. This view of time, *kairos*, and scientific development "draws attention to the ways in which various elements that exist in science and the world at a given time and place do not add up, or do not make sense," tracing a history of science that moves beyond a clean chronology of revolutionary breakthroughs (6). In addition to the topological approach, each chapter is framed through the lens of a different rhetorical concept—such as memory, stasis, and topology—to "demand different ways of understanding rhetoric as movement" (13). Though the methodological layering can occasionally feel overwhelming to a reader, Koerber models how these concepts can be used to better understand messy

movements in scientific history. One particularly well-accomplished use of this tactic employs the Aristotelian enthymeme to show that “audiences do not need any evidence to be persuaded about a given point” when shared assumptions are already present, like pregnancy hormones causing memory loss (181). Employing these traditional rhetorical canons reimagines how rhetoricians can engage our histories to better serve present movements of justice. Scholars and instructors in rhetoric can use Koerber’s analysis as a model for how to apply traditional tactics to contemporary issues.

Koerber’s analysis questions how useful action is as a framework for determining power in a specific situation. For example, in early scientific documents about hysterical women, the womb itself was given a good degree of agency by the scientific community. The womb was depicted as moving around within the female body, causing whole hosts of issues (23, 44, 186). Later, hormones were given equivalent agency on a women’s reproductive capacity to reinscribe the brain-reproductive organ connection. However, Koerber’s analysis shows that viewing the wandering womb and wild, dominating hormones as expressions of female agency misses a key piece of the puzzle. How these understandings of agency and connection developed is far more revealing. Positioning hormones as entities with powerful agency has been “especially detrimental to women” throughout time because it heightens fears of women’s bodies (125). Similarly, a woman’s perceived ability to control hormones can misplace agency and assert that a woman can and should be able to account for all of her bodily actions.

*HOMELAND MATERNITY, POSTFEMINISM,
AND THE RHETORIC OF CHOICE*

This notion of agency reasserts the presence of choice in reproduction, which is further explored in Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz’s monograph, *Homeland Maternity: US Security Culture and the New Reproductive Regime*. This investigation, however, inflects the notion of agency to emphasize the discourse of postfeminism and choice. Postfeminism, as Fixmer-Oraiz describes, asserts that women have moved past the need for feminism: “It appropriates the language of feminism as it undermines feminism’s radical impulse toward structural transformation” (12). Individual solutions and choice—such as birth control and Sheryl Sandberg’s “lean in” politics—dominate the conversations, leaving little space for exploring radical change. Structurally inequitable conditions are written off as the consequence of individual poor choices, and the political shrinks to the personal sphere. This postfeminism veils the need for further structural change through assertions of increased agency and choice. It is important to note that many postfeminist arguments are deeply situated within a late capitalist framework and

are therefore highly reliant upon structures of the state to create empowerment. As Greta Gaard argues, the postfeminist conception of choice “has been commodified and sold back to women as consumers of the new fertility-enhancing technologies” to reaffirm the reproductive body as a resource (105). Motherhood, a historically precarious role, is specifically shaped by this landscape, and Fixmer-Oraiz interrogates these postfeminist conceptions of choice within motherhood by showing how reproductive bodies are used to both threaten national security and engender belonging to the state.

Homeland Maternity is a particularly poignant text to engage with in light of recent US immigration politics. The monograph is divided into chapters that focus on various themes in the new reproductive regime—security, risk, emergency, and crisis. Each chapter addresses a specific case study that examines how each of these themes works to reassert the power and control of the state. To trace the biopolitical power the state plays in motherhood, the text analyzes the opt-out revolution, the risky pregnancy of Nadya Suleman (otherwise known as Octomom), crisis pregnancy centers, and emergency contraception by reading a range of artifacts. These case studies show that homeland maternity intentionally masks the stratification of acceptable pregnancy (145). Instead of employing the many examples of impediments to reproductive rights that are egregious, Fixmer-Oraiz selects these texts because “they illustrate the everyday contexts that undergird alignments between motherhood and the nation that fuel the (discursive and material) conditions” that aim to control reproductive bodies (144). The sites she studies capture the more quotidian expressions of surveillance by the state that are made normal and palatable in their hyper-presence. In doing so, the text makes a compelling argument for the pervasive nature of this control.

Additionally, the case studies—which range from the media’s treatment of real people to fictional explorations of motherhood in *Juno*, *Glee*, and *Teen Mom*—address the ways multiply marginalized communities are impacted by the state. To a greater extent than any of the other texts under consideration in this review, Fixmer-Oraiz discusses how race, class, and citizenship interact with reproductive capacity and role. Particularly, the emphasis on the relationship between the state and the body “intensifies the surveillance and policing of women’s lives,” especially when women do not fit the archetype of ideal motherhood (147). *Homeland Maternity* calls for further, more sustained attention to reproductive justice and a shift from individualistic understandings of choice to structural understandings that address the ways systems of surveillance affect different bodies to varying degrees.

The emphasis on individual choice in reproduction is more than a tactic to centralize personal decision making and shift responsibility off of structures of inequity, however. Fixmer-Oraiz argues that “homeland maternity specifies how

national security is tethered to securing the domestic and reproductive body” (4). Though the woman’s role as mother has long been a site for policies, politics, and beliefs to play out, the discursive connection between citizenship and contemporary, intensive motherhood has not been fully explicated. To do this work, Fixmer-Oraiz asserts three critical insights: motherhood underwrites a sense of national belonging, contemporary reproduction is shaped by risk, and intensive mothering—marked by the social demand of maternal perfection, subservience to children, and nostalgic notions of “virtuous” motherhood—codifies a distinct experience for those who do not benefit from and affirm the state (11–13). In other words, the state continually employs white, hyper-feminine domesticity through the rhetoric of choice.

As contemporary motherhood is steeped in the postfeminist politics of choice, agency as a framework for understanding reproductivity is increasingly stripped of its import. In the new reproductive regime, women “are faced, at once, with diminishing reproductive options and increasing personal liability for their decision making” (148). In each chapter of the monograph, Fixmer-Oraiz demonstrates the means by which the rhetoric of choice is presented and then ultimately used against women to critique their decisions. Reproductive control through egg freezing, emergency contraception, and adoption are “to be celebrated so long as [they are] relegated to individual women’s management of structural forms of gendered inequity” (55). Additionally, choice is not granted to all reproductive bodies equally. For example, Nadya Suleman was publicly ostracized for her choice to pursue IVF without a husband or sustained source of income. Similar choices to have several children made by white affluent women—Michelle Duggar and Kate Gosselin—did not cause an ethical and medical uproar. “In this way, ‘choice’ prohibits our capacity to critique excess use or misappropriation of resources by women of means and, simultaneously, bars public defense of the reproductive self-determination” of the women who do not fit the image of ideal motherhood (82). Choice, like many of the other discourses I discuss in this review, appears to give women power over their bodies, but it actually reasserts biopolitical control. Though the agency of individual women is threatened in this space, the ease with which the state can employ “choice” to serve their own needs of affirming nationhood should give us pause. This discourse asserts a more individually focused framework that, in many cases, ignores the structural, material, political, and embodied realities of reproduction.

MATERIAL FEMINISM AND METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

Metaphorical language, definitions of action, and the appropriation of choice within reproductive discourse can actually, as the scholars discussed in this review

argue, harm women. For example, there are real circumstances in which women do not have autonomy over their reproductive capacity. Many women, including current refugees from the Global South, still receive forced hysterectomies, documented as recently 2020, when claims of forced hysterectomies emerged out of a Georgia ICE center (Spagat and Amy). The discourses of agency challenged in each of these texts through interrogating the ways bodies have been discussed suggest that a woman's reproductive body is liminal, that through proper attention, abandonment of other concerns, and through choice, a woman can fix all of her reproductive problems. None of this is to say that feminist and rhetorical scholars should abandon agency as a concept or framework altogether; rather, I hope this acts as a call for further work that centers other concerns.

Works such as those by Jensen, Koerber, and Fixmer-Oraiz offer a few of these other pathways for analysis in reproductive rhetoric and, importantly, as a means for justice. *Infertility* challenges us to rethink the dominant historical trajectory that positioned fertility as either natural or artificial. Jensen calls for increased attention to “the rhetorical circulation of ideas and toward historical topoi and their percolation into contemporary times” through an increased focus on the “flow and circulation of such topoi within chronologically related moments” (167). This move would unhinge some of the pervasive metaphors, such as barrenness, that demand an agential approach to the reproductive body. Similarly, *From Hysteria to Hormones* offers new methodological possibilities through the adoption of Michel Serres's topological approach. Koerber calls for a “large-scale change to the scientific knowledge enterprise” that tells a very linear view of scientific discovery (209). She suggests that scientists and rhetoricians alike shift from a model of explaining to exploring to find new modes of knowledge production about women and their bodies that do not rely upon action and agency (210). *Homeland Maternity* co-opts and foregrounds motherhood for the purposes of reproductive justice by “recognizing the *human* rights of those who carry, birth, and/or parent children, as well as those who do not” (154). The text also encourages the subversion of compulsory motherhood, pronatalism, and intensive mothering to undo the racist, classist, and heterosexist configurations of reproduction. Fixmer-Oraiz asks scholars to “invest in the radical possibilities of rhetorical (re)invention to harness and adapt the potentialities of motherhood, family and citizenship” that do not depend upon agency but interrogate more broadly what it means to have a reproductive body (158). Each reimagining offers the potential for scholars of reproductive, scientific, and feminist rhetoric to engage differently with women and their reproductive choices and experiences.

Another clear path forward would be to center the embodied reproductive experiences of women. Though vast, the primary sources grounding these texts are primarily concerned with the discourses happening *around* women's

reproductive bodies, experiences, and capacities, and less of those elements as *told by* women. As Koerber quips, “in many ways, [her] book could have been titled ‘Centuries of Men Explaining Women to Themselves’” (209). There is a breadth of women’s reproductive experience that has not received analysis for the very reasons that each of the monographs highlight—these discourses have remained largely veiled or misrepresented throughout history. Each of these texts does the important work of tracing historical and sociopolitical discourses across a wide range of artifacts, thus offering a vital jumping off point for future scholarship to engage subjects directly and ask different kinds of questions.

Ultimately, and as I suggest in this review, agency as a theoretical or methodological framework for understanding women’s embodied experiences does not always accomplish the goals it sets out to. The central texts here imagine new ways of analyzing the complex histories and discourses about women and their reproductive organs, choices, and roles. Through continued interrogation of these issues, scholars can better serve the goals of reproductive justice. By pursuing this task, we heed the final words of *Homeland Maternity*: “The possibilities of reproductive justice rely on our capacity to dream other ways of relating into existence” (159).

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