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Self, Standpoint, Network: Learning from the Autoethnographic Methods of Reproductive Justice

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Abstract: *»Revealing one's subjective self and standpoint increasingly is treasured in ethnography as well as the reproductive justice movement because we actually challenge the omnipresent, allegedly neutral voice that distances itself from the objects of the discourse« (Ross 2017: 207).*
This essay addresses political threats to reproductive bodily autonomy vis-à-vis the built environment and speculates how the intersectional, feminist perspective of Reproductive Justice (SisterSong 2025), a human rights framework calling for bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, and sustainable communities founded by a coalition of Black women in 1994, could transform architecture into a more politically engaged and socially imaginative discipline. In contrast to the objective neutrality of conventional design practice, this framework draws from self-awareness of individual needs in collective contexts to care for others and build sustainable futures. To become more supportive of real, diverse human bodies and lived experiences, architecture could adopt autoethnographic methods, which draw from personal experience to address oppression and build common grounds.
The autoethnography of Reproductive Justice is explored through the lenses of *self* (an individual's immediate, personal experience), *standpoint* (the perspective shaped in relation to larger societal contexts), and *network* (the broader interconnected social and environmental relationships). A case study of recent academic design studios addressing Reproductive Justice and the built environment amid increasing threats and restrictions to reproductive healthcare in the US demonstrates how designers could draw from their own experiences to establish compassion for others and embrace the interconnectedness of all three scales in imagining alternative futures. Countering the status quo of abstraction from real, embodied experiences in design, RJ offers a model of engaging situated lives and perspectives in building just futures.

Keywords: Reproductive Justice; Autoethnography; Embodiment; Feminist Practice; Pedagogy.

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Introduction

One of the most pervasive tools in architecture is the generic »user.« As a stand-in for real human bodies, the abstract scale figure distances designers from the actual, lived experiences of the built environments they create. Experiences that are shaped by forces other than spatial composition, like social, political, and cultural dynamics, as well as individual human characteristics, e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, health, physical and intellectual abilities, and economic status. Instead of addressing the intersectional complexity of embodied human identities, the assumption of objective neutrality enables architects to avoid the political implications of their work. Conventional design methods often apply this kind of false neutrality to the built environment in ways that ignore interpersonal differences in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach, thus perpetuating the systemic exclusion of marginalized bodies. In this way, they avoid addressing societal constraints that often exercise more control over bodies than their immediate physical surroundings.

Alternatively, feminist methods focus on the ways in which individual, lived experiences are impacted by societal contexts, recognizing diverse embodied realities and challenging existing power hierarchies that negate difference. This undermines the notion of a generic user by foregrounding the entanglement of personal identity and the surrounding environment. For example, an individual's ability to access abortion in the US is compounded by their gender, race, and class, as well as their geographic location and legal setting. In the contemporary political context of the US over the past decade, where right-wing extremism has gained mainstream tolerance despite its existential threats against marginalized groups e.g., women, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, disciplinary neutrality proves complicit in perpetuating an anti-liberal status quo. New applications of methods that center real and diverse human bodies and experiences are urgently necessary to affirm and protect individual freedoms from threats to take them away.

This essay addresses political threats to reproductive bodily autonomy vis-à-vis the built environment and speculates how the intersectional, feminist perspective of Reproductive Justice (RJ), a human rights framework calling for bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, and sustainable communities founded by a coalition of Black women in 1994, could transform architecture into a more politically engaged and socially imaginative discipline. The RJ movement altered reproductive rights advocacy through

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autoethnographic methods centering the specific experiences and needs of marginalized groups who were not properly represented in mainstream feminist activism at the time. Countering the status quo of abstraction from real, embodied experiences in design, RJ offers a model of engaging situated lives and perspectives in building just futures.

Architecture's failure to address the needs of specific groups perpetuates inequality in the built environment. Conventional design neutrality often produces built environments in which human bodies that do not conform to assumed norms are made more vulnerable, and perpetuate the discipline's detachment from political realities.[1] Instead, autoethnographic methods that draw from personal experiences could foster mutual understanding and address inequity and oppression – »an active demonstration of the ›personal is political‹« (Ettore 2017: 3). The distinct yet interconnected positions of *self*, *standpoint*, and *network* found in the RJ framework offer multiscale application for spatial practice. First, the *self*-experience and knowledge of user(s) and designer(s) could overcome disciplinary abstraction from politics. Second, an understanding of *standpoint* situates individual lives in relation to systemic inequalities. Third, an international *network* of action demonstrates how interrelationships connect individuals to each other and to broader systems of care, instigating transformative political action across scales.

Considering these three scales offers insights for reimagining design as political advocacy and action. A case study at the end of the chapter considers the work of recent academic design studios addressing Reproductive Justice and the built environment after the overturn of Roe v. Wade.[2] The studio

1 Architectural critics and spatial practitioners have investigated ways that women and other marginalized groups are adversely impacted by power hierarchies in the design of the built environment, in such books as: Cheng, Irene/Davis II, Charles L./ Wilson, Mabel O. (2020): *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Culture Politics & the Built Environment), Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press; Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative, (1994) *Making Space: Women and the Man-made Environment*, London: Pluto Press; Kern, Leslie (2020): *Feminist City: Claiming Space In A Man Made World*, London/New York: Verso Books; Weisman, Leslie Kanes (1994): *Discrimination by Design*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

2 Roe v. Wade is a landmark US Supreme Court decision in 1973 that established constitutional protection for an individual's legal right to abortion in the US. Under Roe, state laws were allowed to regulate abortion access, for example according to the gestational duration of pregnancy, but could not ban it entirely. The 2022 decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization overturned Roe v. Wade, ending federal protection of abortion rights, enabling states to fully restrict abortion access for the first time in nearly 50 years.

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outcomes encompass comprehensive, multiscale research and design proposals for enabling access to reproductive healthcare despite increasing legal uncertainties and spatial challenges caused by state-by-state disparities in the US since the overturn of Roe ended constitutional protection of reproductive rights, returning abortion legislation to individual states. Culminating in a traveling exhibition entitled »Spatializing Reproductive Justice« (Brown et al. 2024), the work showcases how the tools of architecture (spatial mapping, critical reasoning, graphic narration, building and environmental design, and site planning) can engage activist and feminist frameworks, and contribute toward just and sustainable reproductive futures for all. Understanding personal experiences as windows into larger structural challenges, architecture could embrace situatedness and discard neutrality, for good.

Personal is Political

Reproductive Justice efforts combine practices of personal storytelling, self-advocacy, and collective activism in pursuit of systemic change to ensure reproductive self-determination and sustainability for all. Coined in 1994 by the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice (WADRJ),[3] Reproductive Justice is the right »to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities« (Sister Song, 2025). As a human rights framework, it addresses how the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality produce »a complicated matrix of reproductive oppression« (Ross 2017b: 62). Concerned by how the reproductive lives and decision-making of Black and low-income women were shaped by broader social inequality in the US and the failure of healthcare policy to address these disparities, the WADRJ identified a need for advocacy by and for those most at risk.

3 The WADRJ was a group of 12 Black women who came together in Chicago amid national healthcare debates. The group felt that the reform proposed by the Clinton administration at the time did not sufficiently address women's reproductive health, and in particular, the specific issues faced by Black and low-income women whose reproductive lives and choices were impacted by systemic inequality beyond abortion access (e.g., housing, labor, criminal justice, and education). Separating from the mainstream pro-choice movement, the WADRJ focused on advocating for a more holistic approach that considered a broader set of issues impacting the reproductive decision-making and well-being of marginalized groups.

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In the US, Black women face higher risks of sexual and domestic abuse and higher rates of maternal health complications and mortality due to systemic racism. The RJ founders were disillusioned by the white feminist movement's narrow focus and »frustrated by the individualist approach of the pro-choice framework« (Price 2020: 340), instead they expanded reproductive rights advocacy to encompass more aspects of an individual's reproductive life, like poverty, violence, welfare reform, drug policy, sex education, and other specific factors impacting the health and safety of Black women. This enabled a more holistically inclusive activist movement working toward reproductive freedom for all, more capable of embracing individual needs rather than clinging to generic assumptions. While the white feminist movement emphasized broad claims of equality, Black women demanded justice (Cooper 2014) (fig. 1).

Individual experiences of marginalization, vulnerability, and precarity can be traced to broader societal inequalities. Practices of ethnography examine subjective human perspectives within their broader social and political contexts. *Autoethnography* uniquely situates this research through the author's personal lens, reflecting on their own lived experiences in relation to larger systems. As a feminist research method, autoethnography enables »personal ›truths‹ and speaking about oneself to transform into narrative representations of political responsibility« (Ettore 2017: 3). This approach scales political agency from the self to the collective, gathering multiple perspectives to illuminate shared oppression and building common grounds that are strengthened by diversity.

For architects, designing environments for multiple subjectivities is not so straightforward. The complexity and contradiction of individual needs, inconsistent from one person to the next and increasingly nuanced the more political factors considered, pose challenges to the tools of the trade that lean on broad generalization – standards, conventions, codes, and other regulatory mechanisms. The personal experience of a designer is inconsistently valued – sometimes celebrated and others, unwanted. Still, personal and professional biases, ignorance, and blind spots crop up, often perpetuating inequity or exclusion in design practices and built outcomes.

Matters typically gendered as female, such as embodiment, care, maintenance, and reproductive labor, are marginalized in architectural discourse and absent from its disciplinary tools. Consider Architecture's most

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1.
»African-American Women Are for Reproductive Freedom: We Remember,« pamphlet, 1994. Courtesy of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). A printed pamphlet and joint statement issued by leaders of Black women's organizations to exert pressure on public policy and denounce racist and sexist oppression.

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celebrated generic user: Le Corbusier's »Modulor,«[4] a universal bodily standard derived from rationalized geometric proportions overlaid on a human figure and interpreted through a patriarchal lens. The resultant graphic has »more to do with the schemes of domination of a given society, than with an objective statistic of physical average« (Failed Architecture 2017). Idealizing the white, able-bodied, masculine form, it negates the existence of other body types. Modulor has no variable characteristics, e.g., race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, political context, or other condition that would impact an individual's spatial experience, mobility, and vulnerability. »Every time that the issue of sexual identity obtruded into Le Corbusier's discussion of the Modulor, the male principle won over the female« (Evans 1995: 285). Le Modular could not get pregnant (neither could his author). As a result, the iconic scale figure remains a symbol of disciplinary misogyny and preference for false abstraction over embodied reality.

Feminist discourse[5] critically examines and challenges the ways environments are constructed and experienced according to systems of power. Scholar Donna Haraway developed the concept of situated knowledges to describe how human perception and knowledge are shaped by individual circumstances and perspective. The notion of a supposedly neutral, objective stance only perpetuates existing power hierarchies – the »conquering gaze from nowhere« (Haraway 1988: 581). In the built environment, generically designed spaces often support dominant groups while contributing to the marginalization of others. This is caused by avoiding the self-specificity of both designer and user. The architect who designs for others without drawing from their own personal experience risks failing to consider the nuanced lived experiences of people who are different from them. Alternatively, autoethnographic methods enable designers to consider their own situated

4 The Modulor is a system of proportional measurements created by Le Corbusier (Charles Edouard Jeanneret) intended to reconcile the scale of a human body within a Euclidean geometry framework. Modulor was developed between 1943 and 1955 in an era of »fascination with mathematics as a potential source of universal truths« (Ostwald 2001). Its recognizable graphic is composed of an abstract illustration of a six-foot English male body with one arm upraised overlayed with a series of Golden Section rectangles. The validity of Modulor as a useful tool is undermined by its »blatant ignorance of actual human proportions,« as well as its ignorance of embodied differences from individual to individual.

5 Feminist discourse explores the interplay of gender, power, and inequality within society, with a focus on how social systems and exchange uphold patriarchal norms.

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knowledge as a means of understanding their self »in relation to others« and society as a highly diverse yet interconnected whole (Ettore 2017: 112).

In addition to designing functional spaces and buildings, architects must increasingly contend with multiple social, political, and environmental crises at once. This demands a sense of empathy for human experiences that are different from one's own. An activist design framework incorporates situated awareness and capacity for nuance in understanding individual livelihoods and broader societal contexts. Adopting autoethnographic methods in design addresses the personal and political conditions of the built environment. The Reproductive Justice framework offers a model for a multiscale perspective, operating through the lenses of self, standpoint, and network, that could shape a more politically engaged and social justice-oriented discipline.

Self

Feminist authors like Audre Lorde[6] and bell hooks[7] transformed their discourse by weaving lived experiences as Black women into their theoretical work. Each used personal storytelling as a powerful tool of self-reflection and political analysis, revealing how personal struggles reflect broader systems of oppression. As a Black lesbian woman, Lorde articulated the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class in her life, describing self-knowledge as »a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing ourselves to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives« (Lorde 1978: 7). Similarly bell hooks used personal narrative to illuminate Black women's critical perspective from the margins of a patriarchal, white supremacist society: »Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out« (hooks 1984: ix).

hooks described social marginalization as being »part of the whole but outside the main body« (ibid.), both entangled within and excluded from

6 Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was a writer, professor and activist whose poetry and prose addressed civil rights issues from an intersectional feminist perspective drawn from her own lived experiences.

7 bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins, (1952–2021) was an author and social critic best known for her writings on race, feminism, and class.

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society at once. Without acknowledging the underlying disparities (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) that produce marginalization, feminist movements cannot adequately advocate for shared and diverse needs. As hooks wrote of her white feminist contemporaries, they »rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group« (hooks 1984: 3). Thus they operate from the position of self but without self-awareness in relation to others, especially those whose experiences differ significantly from their own.

Social justice isn't achieved by assuming commonality, but by recognizing difference. Intersectional subordination, as articulated by civil rights advocate Kimberly Crenshaw, recognizes the ways that »the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment« (Crenshaw 1991: 1249). Intersectional feminism acknowledges that while sexism is experienced by many women, their experiences are distinguished by other compounding forms of oppression affecting individual women in different ways. hooks and Lorde's autoethnography resists generalizing oppression by emphasizing subjective experience, reframing broader political contexts through their personal lenses.

What Lorde and hooks did for feminist discourse, the RJ framework did for reproductive rights, centering marginalized groups' experiences of reproductive injustice tied to broader systemic racial inequality. Activist and WADRJ co-founder Loretta Ross described: »Instead of working together based on shared victimization, we acknowledge that we all suffer in some way from white supremacy and population control, but we do not suffer in the same way, nor are we all equally oppressed« (Ross 2017a: 207). Published in the Washington Post on August 16,1994, the WADRJ 's introductory statement articulated concerns for the unique health problems of Black women, describing reproductive freedom as »a life and death issue« (WADRJ 1994). Addressing their intersectional vulnerabilities, they called for anti-discriminatory policies and Black women's representation in decision-making bodies. They emphasized various forms of reproductive oppression, including the lack of access to abortion as well as the lack of support for improving sex education and prenatal and postnatal healthcare and preventing sexual and domestic abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and teenage pregnancy in communities of color. »When we centered ourselves in our lens, we understood how intersectional paradigms could reframe historical inequalities and differences in power and opportunities« (Ross 2017a: 173).

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Reproductive justice calls for the human right to safe and sustainable communities, but there is no universal definition for what that requires – it is specific to context and individual circumstances. The right to healthy, resilient environments goes hand in hand with the right to live without restrictions against personal freedom and well-being. Ensuring safety, feeling unthreatened and protected from danger, and sustainability – the ability to endure with resources not being depleted – demands both forward-looking political liberation and retrospective healing and repair. Ross describes the RJ movement as an ongoing »synthesis of theory, strategy, and practice« (Ross 2017 a: 171). She had her WADRJ co-founders comingled their individual experiences, describing Reproductive Justice as an ongoing, collective process of »introspective storytelling,« cultivating self-knowledge, self-preservation and self-determination in the face of shared, systemic oppression (ibid.: 207).

Standpoint

Expanding from the self, one's standpoint describes their position in relation to broader societal systems. This frame of reference emphasizes how personal experiences are shaped by individual circumstances within larger social and political contexts. Standpoint is both a unique way of seeing, a mechanism for connection and mutual understanding between individuals, and a locus of gravity that can shift public perception. The RJ movement positioned its advocacy from the standpoint of Black women, diverging from the mainstream feminist movement that largely defaulted to the perspective of white women. RJ's origins preceded its public launch in 1994 through earlier organized efforts to raise awareness of and support for the unique reproductive experiences of women of color vis-à-vis the healthcare system in the US.

In 1983, activist and healthcare advocate Byllye Avery[8] organized the First National Conference on Black Women's Health Issues at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA.[9] The event drew nearly 2,000 attendees for a weekend of panels and workshops on specific health issues uniquely faced by Black women, as

8 Byllye Avery (1937b) is an American healthcare activist and proponent of reproductive justice who works to expand access to healthcare services and education for Black women. She is the founder of the National Black Women's Health Project (est. 1983), the first national organization to focus on Black women's reproductive health issues.

9 https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/11/headway/black-women-health.html, accessed October 20, 2024.

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well as the opportunity to exchange personal experiences and information freely amongst themselves. Avery organized the event after noticing in her research statistics a disproportionate occurrence of disease and distress amongst Black women. The conference encouraged participants to consider and discuss »how oppression affected their interactions with the health system [...] refram[ing] health as inextricable from racism« (Mathis 2023). After the conference, Avery founded the National Black Women's Health Project[10] and established chapters in private homes across the southern US. In these spaces, Black women could gather in small groups and share their concerns often ignored or dismissed by the medical establishment.

At the same time, local community-based healthcare initiatives emerged to meet unserved needs for individuals estranged them from the healthcare system altogether. In Harlem during the 1990s, a program called First Steps[11] provided counseling and outpatient drug treatment for mothers who used substances. As one of the program directors, Lynn Roberts, activist and professor at the CUNY School of Public Health, described: »While the mainstream media was busy demonizing mothers and labeling their children »crack babies,« we were busy engaging in the revolutionary act of »mothering – creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life« (Roberts 2017: 129). The program was unique in its offering of »support rather than punishment« (ibid.: 129) to the individuals and families it served, demonstrating the need for non-judgmental, unconditional care for childbearing and caretaking people alongside their families and communities. To provide these services required compassion and understanding about and from the standpoint of individuals struggling against the odds »to become mothers, to not become mothers, to mother the children we birthed, to mother the children other mothers were denied their right to mother, and to mother other mothers« (Roberts 2017: 133).

Reproductive Justice demands awareness of the entanglement of personal experience and systemic marginalization and its impact on individual lives and communities. Individual reproductive choices depend on a multiplicity of aspects of person and place. The right to make one's own decisions in these

10 https://bwhi.org/, accessed October 20, 2024.

11 First Steps was part of a larger initiative known as the Family Rehabilitation Program (FRP) that operated from 1990 to 1995 and focused on the needs of low-income Black and Latina women who used substances. City funding for the program was entirely cut in the first year of the Giuliani administration. (Roberts 2017, 129)

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matters must be unconditionally affirmed, without qualifications based on someone else's judgment. Awareness of standpoint is key to avoiding objective assumptions or moralistic prejudice. Ensuring reproductive freedom for all means respecting difference and individual self-determination amid the »competing ideals of equality and the social reality of inequality [caused by] disparity in opportunities to determine our reproductive destinies« (Ross 2017a: 212).

Network

The third scale of reference is that of the network, or the set of relationships that connect individuals to each other and to broader systems of care. Networks »play an essential role in the emergence and ongoing work of social movements« (Brain 2023: 120). Throughout the history of struggle for reproductive freedom in the US and globally, underground networks have established and protected care access, distributed resources and information, and assisted individuals in overcoming barriers to receive the care they need. Before abortion was legalized in the US in 1973, an underground group called The Jane Collective[12] facilitated safe abortions for thousands of individuals in Chicago through a robust grassroots collective that operated outside official healthcare systems and under the radar of law enforcement. After Roe v. Wade enshrined constitutional protection for abortion in the US, The Jane Collective disbanded, and with it, a false sense of security took hold that reproductive care access would always be available through official channels, despite some hoop-jumping. But the lived realities of many proved otherwise. Even while Roe was upheld, the multitude of barriers to care access – time-based state abortion bans, long travel distances to clinics, financial burden, lengthy time requirements, social stigma, targeted misinformation – were insurmountable for many.

In the US, reproductive rights efforts since Roe v. Wade have focused on protecting legal access to abortion via healthcare providers and formal medical systems, even as the venues for this care were pushed outside hospitals to independent clinics. After the overturn of Roe, practices of

12 The Jane Collective was an underground network of pro-abortion and women's liberation activists that assisted more than 11,000 individuals in procuring safe, secret abortions in Chicago from 1969 to 1973.

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self-managed abortion (SMA), or ending pregnancy via methods outside formal healthcare systems, surged in the US with increased use of abortion pills. Centuries-old SMA practices like herbal remedies involving plants with abortive properties have been practiced around the world since long before Western medicine emerged. In the US, medication abortion (abortion pills) became the most common method after its USFDA approval in 2000 and the expansion of telemedical services in 2020 (Friedrich-Karnik 2024). This was preceded in the Global South – in countries where abortion rights were never guaranteed – where robust underground SMA networks expanded medical abortion access and changed its public perception over time, in some cases instigating momentum for legalization.

In Latin America, where until recently abortion was mostly banned, an international network of activist groups created hotline accompaniment models beginning in the 1980s to provide individuals with the resources for self-induced medical abortion (Yanow 2024). Accompaniment networks train volunteers to offer one-on-one abortion support while »building a sense of community and dismantling stigma« more broadly (ibid.). Linking between hotlines in various countries enabled widespread, safe practice of SMA across Latin America, changing public opinion over time and contributing to the recent decriminalization of abortion in Mexico, Argentina, and Columbia. Known as the »green wave« of changing abortion laws, these achievements are the products of decades-long collaboration between feminist individuals, groups, and organizations, that persisted with or without the support of local healthcare providers and politicians (ibid.).

On a global scale, SMA movement networks create bridges between countries and regions by linking individuals and groups, particularly in locally criminalized contexts. The reciprocity between »formal, named networks that link organizations nationally [and] densely woven informal networks amongst activists« can enable structural change over time (Brain 2023: 122). City or country-specific movements emerge in dialogue with those in other places, cultivating international reciprocity between locations, contexts, and scales – »interpersonal and interorganizational ties« (ibid.). Common hardships like governmental dictatorship and gender-based violence amongst countries on different continents can be sources of mutual understanding and information exchange that build international solidarity. This transnational autoethnography empowers situated activist efforts to build upon one another in geographically disparate places.

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The autoethnographic specificity of people and place that underpins the global Reproductive Justice movements offers a counternarrative to conventional neutrality in the design of built environments. As Loretta Ross declared, »revealing one's subjective self and standpoint« challenges the »omnipresent, allegedly neutral voice that distances itself from the objects of the discourse« (Ross 2017a: 207). Architects could learn from RJ's intersectional activism and self- awareness as a genesis for sustainable built futures supporting holistic individual and collective well-being.

Reproductive Justice in Pedagogy

Amid compounding political and environmental crises, feminist methods centering interconnectivity and community care offer necessary alternatives to autonomy in architecture pedagogy and practice. The autoethnographic lenses of self, standpoint, and network could shape a critical framework, pushing design considerations beyond form, aesthetic, and program, to engage issues of identity, place, and politics. Centering human subjectivity in design requires an understanding of diverse communities gained through listening to their lived experiences, learning from their situated knowledges, and investigating how environments are experienced differently by different bodies.

The future of a more socially and politically engaged discipline begins in its pedagogy, where meaningful engagement with different human experiences and perspectives is complemented by the agility to adapt or even reject outdated disciplinary conventions. To push back against default neutrality, architecture education could better establish designers' self-awareness in relation to the individuals and communities they serve, and the ability to draw from other disciplinary frameworks as needed. Incorporating autoethnographic methods in design teaching encourages students to reflect on their own experiences as sources of empathy and awareness to better understand and prioritize human needs, including those that are very different from their own. These methods inspire agency to respond to the complex, personal and political experiences of human bodies in the design of shared environments. For academic instruction, this demands more politically engaged subject matter in design studio courses, new forms of collaborative teaching methods, and continuous seeking of opportunities for transdisciplinary exchange.

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A case study of implementing these demands in design education took place after the Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization Supreme Court decision[13] in three academic architecture studios taught in the fall of 2022. The studios formed an interinstitutional coalition addressing the past, present, and future precarity of reproductive care in the US through the lens of the built environment. They were taught at the City College of New York (CCNY), Columbia University, and Syracuse University by architects and professors Lindsay Harkema, Bryony Roberts, and Lori Brown, respectively. This experimental, collaborative teaching format formed a supportive network – sharing resources, instruction methods, and a series of guest lectures, and enabling exchange between students and faculty beyond their respective institutional walls. The studios focused on a research-based approach to Reproductive Justice in the built environment, investigating the spatial, legal, and social logistics of reproductive healthcare after Dobbs. To do so, students documented the geographic disparity of care access amid a changing landscape of state abortion bans, restrictions and protections. This analysis complemented research about sexual and reproductive healthcare types, formats, procedures, and the critical underground networks past and present that have worked to enable access despite political adversity and legal uncertainty.

Underpinning the studios' design and research efforts were a robust historical survey and an active discussion of the Reproductive Justice framework and its activist network. Students read foundational texts by key RJ authors and heard guest lectures by a series of experts in the fields of public health, social justice, reproductive healthcare, law, and design. Equipped with these perspectives, students considered the individual experiences of reproductive care-seekers in various locations and circumstances across the country. How would an individual in a state with legal restrictions travel across borders to access essential care? What would their journey entail? How much would it cost? Which networks of support would be needed? How would environmental conditions shape their experience and impact their journey to care? Visualizations of this research through national and regional-scale maps revealed the constantly changing landscape of reproductive healthcare access and demystified the realities of care procedures and their often contradictory

13 The 2022 Supreme Court decision in Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization changed reproductive rights in the US by overturning Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey. Dobbs removed constitutional protection of abortion, returning its legal regulation to individual states.

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2.
»*Carewear,*« *transformed hospital gown, Student work by Valeska Abarca (CCNY), Fall 2022.*

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medical and legal timelines. Students considered environmental characteristics that would support individuals through difficult physical and emotional experiences by drawing from their personal healthcare experiences. This foundational work shaped their final design proposals for facilities, systems, and networks, enabling access to reproductive care in diverse contexts.

Teaching Self, Standpoint, Network

At the outset of the studios, initial exercises encouraged students to find a personal connection to Reproductive Justice, establishing a sense of self in relation to the studio topic. While most found the subject matter important and valuable, not all found it relevant in their own lives at the start of the semester. Introductory assignments invited students to reflect on past healthcare experiences and identify positive and negative aspects, as well as how they made them feel. At Columbia, students depicted care experiences in narrative sectional drawings, highlighting themes of misunderstanding and miscommunication between patients and care providers. At CCNY, students considered feelings of discomfort or vulnerability and channeled their memory of those experiences into the creation of reimagined paper hospital gowns, designed to empower the wearer (themselves) (fig. 2).

Shifting into research, students delved into understanding and visualizing the lived realities of restricted access to reproductive healthcare and establishing critical standpoints across scales through drawing and mapping. National maps revealed the rapidly evolving landscape of abortion access considering changing state legal circumstances (fig. 3). At the regional scale, students traced travel routes, itineraries, and associated costs for those seeking care across state borders, and outlined the associated barriers and challenges faced along the way (fig. 5). From an architectural perspective, students drew the intimate environments of private homes and clinical environments where medical and surgical abortions occur. As the studio's design outcomes, students developed architectural proposals for clinics, facilities, and infrastructures enabling access to care, conceived as prototypical nodes within larger networks of care. Each studio had its own project framing, within which students determined the locations, site contexts, programs, and typologies of their projects according to their research narratives and how they felt compelled to respond.

Their projects imagined environments and systems aiming to improve patient experiences and health outcomes, fostering individual comfort and

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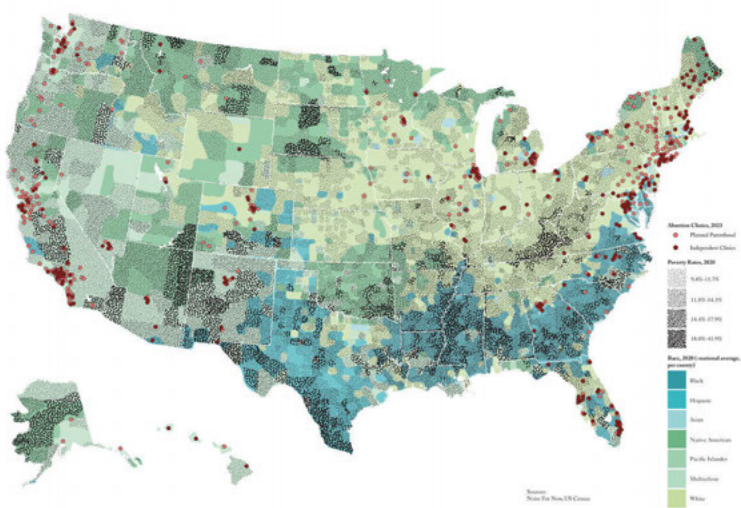

3.
Map by Sadie Imae and Lindsay Harkema, based on work created by students of The City College of New York. Drawing updated by the curatorial team, May 2022.

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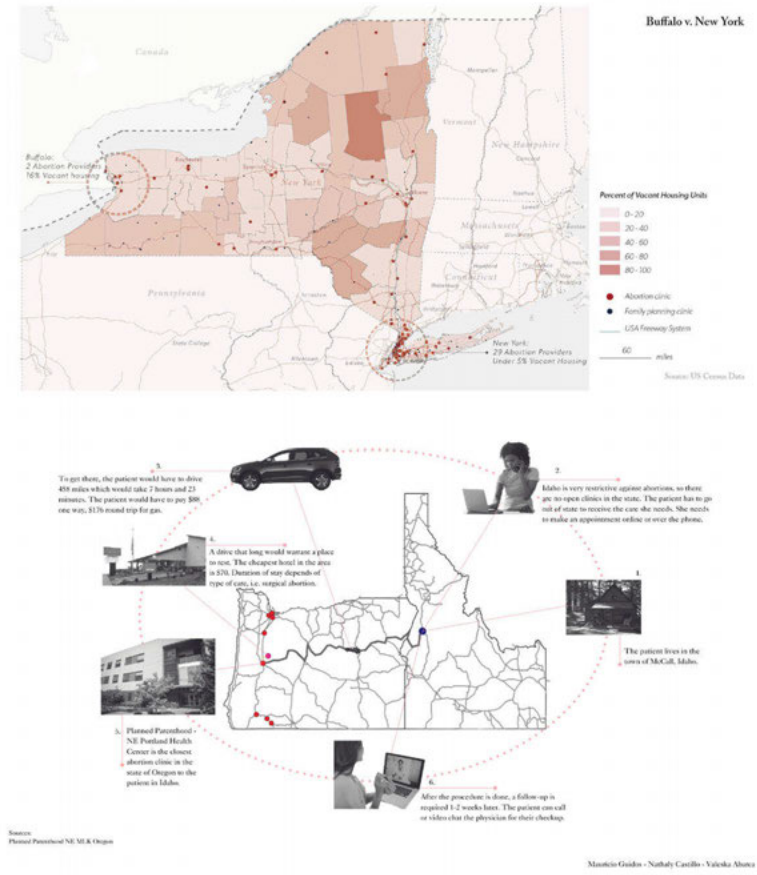

4.
Maps of travel distances and associated costs to access abortion care in various locations. Student work by Valeska Abarca, Nathaly Castillo, Mauricio Guidos (CCNY).

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community support, and, where necessary, offering spatial and programmatic tactics to circumvent local state restrictions. Amid an increasingly hostile political context, the projects slipped between judicial boundaries and nestled within spaces of exception. They occupied ambiguous legal zones, repurposed decommissioned buildings, and activated existing care networks with new spatial and operational strategies. Rooted in intersectional feminism, the projects consider the whole journey of a care-seeking individual. They tested programmatic hybrids, infrastructural systems, and inventive site planning to counter restrictions and enable access to care. In restrictive state contexts, proposals were focused on resource sharing, education, and spatial tactics like mobile clinics to support individuals needing to travel for legal access to care. In protective state contexts, they expanded capacity of existing facilities, reimagined care programs to provide more holistic support, and integrated robust systems of reproductive care into public landscapes. The resulting body of work makes visible issues that are often private, unseen, and ignored within the architectural discipline.

The students' projects incorporated strategies of landscape design, adaptive reuse, public/private partnerships, telehealth systems, and mobile clinic networks to broaden access and transit to care beyond site limits. Considering care sequences and various durations of stay, one student group distributed facilities throughout a federally owned site to provide medical and surgical abortion care, abortion pill distribution, telehealth, therapy, short and long-term recovery stay, and childcare services embedded within national recreation areas. The design scope encompassed both the intangible, lived experiences of care seekers and the technical and functional performance of the structures proposed. Flexible spatial sequences, sensory-based material selections, and accessible design conveyed the intent for the architecture to feel as if it were tailored to each user's unique needs and circumstances (fig. 5).

»Spatializing Reproductive Justice«

The studio outcomes are now the content of a traveling exhibition entitled *Spatializing Reproductive Justice*, which opened at the Center for Architecture in New York in 2024[14] and aims to raise awareness about the disparity

14 https://www.centerforarchitecture.org/exhibitions/spatializing-reproductive-justice/, accessed October 20, 2024.

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of reproductive healthcare access in the US after Roe and the agency of designers to respond. The exhibition showcases the student projects alongside professional works, speculative and built, as well as highlighting artistic works like Michelle Browder's »Mothers of Gynecology«[15] and how to perform an abortion's »Trigger Planting.«[16] It features an overview of the Reproductive Justice movement, highlighting key histories, figures, texts, material practices, and organizations in a large quilt-like wall graphic (fig. 6). As it did for the academic studios, the RJ framework serves as the theoretical foundation and knowledge base for the exhibition, emphasizing how the intersecting and compounding factors of race, class, and gender impact an individual's access to care.

Expanding from the academic studios, »*Spatializing Reproductive Justice*« aims to raise awareness within and beyond the architecture profession about the agency of spatial practices in the fight for reproductive justice. It endeavors to foster dialogue amongst design professionals, healthcare providers, scholars, activists, and the public about supporting reproductive justice in the US amid an increasingly volatile and evolving political landscape. Together, the academic studio work and exhibition diverge from disciplinary neutrality vis-à-vis controversial political subject matter, not by articulating a particular position but in that the lived realities of those affected are revealed. The research displayed conveys objective data – historical timelines of reproductive rights-related events, maps visualizing the state-by-state legality of abortion layered with relevant demographic data, and catalogs of forms of reproductive care. Running like a news ticker along the top of the wall displays is a continuous, repeating statement: »This is a Public Service Announcement.«

Designed by FLUFFF Studio[17] to travel to various institutions, the exhibition components are a kit of parts that can be reconfigured for subsequent venues, gathering local projects at each new location. The student projects are printed on fabric curtains hung from custom conduit frames, their arrangement pinching and folding the exhibition space, a spatial metaphor to the barriers and blockages encountered by those seeking reproductive care (fig. 7). Sheer curtains strung alongside the exhibition content evoke the curtained

15 https://www.anarchalucybetsey.org/, accessed October 20, 2024.

16 https://www.howtoperformanabortion.com/trigger-planting, accessed October 20, 2024.

17 https://www.flufffff.space/, accessed October 20, 2024.

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5.
Experiential collage of reproductive care facility sited in a federally protected landscape. Student work by Valeska Abarca, Nathaly Castillo, Mauricio Guidos (CCNY).

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6.
Installation view, Reproductive Justice Today wall display, Spatializing Reproductive Justice, Center for Architecture, New York, 2024. Photograph by Asya Gorovits.

7.
Installation view, Spatializing Reproductive Justice, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2025. Photograph by Lucy Landre.

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spaces of medical exam rooms and domestic environments. Punctuating the layout are handmade pink and green mop-head stalactites that dangle from frames and makeshift seating elements, softening edges and channeling domestic themes of care and maintenance.

From the research and design work of the students to the tactile details of the exhibition, *Spatializing Reproductive Justice* is a collective work about individual bodies in space and context. Human reproductive lives and freedoms are defined by their built environments – geographic location, access to transportation networks and infrastructures of care, and the look and feel of built spaces in which care is provided. They are also regulated, unequally and sometimes violently, according to aspects of their human identities and physical beings. Generic users and neutral design standards bear no relevance in these circumstances, where every aspect of embodied life is uniquely personal and situated. The real conditions in which these experiences occur reveal how much the discipline has yet to acknowledge about the politics of space.

For architecture, Reproductive Justice is a framework that designers could support and uphold through the design of built environments and learn from to better engage with individual experiences in relation to broader systems of power. Through education and design techniques that explore the interconnected scales of self, standpoint, and network, spatial practitioners could respond, meaningfully and non-neutrally, to political complexity. Autoethnography offers orientational methods to help navigate various contexts during the design process, at times drawing connections between the real lives of designers and end users in ways that foster more human-centric environmental outcomes. Networks are crucial for solidarity, support, and scalability in order for architecture to become political. Thus, a Reproductive Justice design philosophy is both deeply personal and universally transformative, intentionally nonstandard, and multi-situated in its pursuit of liberatory futures for every body.

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