

## Childbirth in the United States: Birth and Power

Gender and Women's Studies 431

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Fall 2017

Professor Annie Menzel

Sterling 3416

acmenzel@wisc.edu

Office hours: Wednesdays 10-12 and by appointment

### Course Description

Childbirth is a **powerful event**, physiologically, psychically, and—for many—spiritually. It marks the entry of a new human being and new relationships into the world. At the same time, **structural forms of power** deeply shape how, when, and for whom birth happens: birth is a key site of both oppression and resistance.

This course examines birth and power in both of these senses through a **reproductive justice framework**, a framework for analysis and action developed by women of color health organizers and scholars. We will analyze **contexts, experiences, practices, ideologies, and historiographies of childbirth** in the United States from roughly the 17th century to the present, with the heaviest emphasis on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We will examine the ways that **colonization, genocide, enslavement, racism, capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and ableism** have shaped all of these aspects of childbirth. We will also inquire how key **movements and groups resisting** some of these forms of oppression have had the power to reshape birth, as well as locating in birth a source of transformational power.

The course is divided into four units: 1) Reproductive Justice, 2) Alternative Birth: A Critical Engagement, 3) Writing Birth Histories (parts I & II), and 4) The Politics of Birth Work.

### Course Learning Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will:

- Attain a deep understanding of the framework of *reproductive justice*, and use it to analyze contemporary discourses, practices, and conditions of childbirth
- Understand how racial, sexual, gender, economic, and colonial domination and resistance have shaped both reproductive realities and the ways that childbirth histories have been written and circulated
- Identify and discuss shifting ideologies and practices of childbirth in the US over time, and relate these to power
- Carry out an independent oral history project on childbirth

## **Classroom expectations and discussion guidelines**

Students are expected to complete the assigned readings before coming to class and to take responsibility as active participants in class discussions. You should come to class prepared to engage in thoughtful and constructive conversation that is respectful of others in the classroom and takes seriously the issues and themes presented in the readings.

That said, discussion participation and silence often manifest structural power differentials. The historical and contemporary forms of oppression, violence, and resistance that have shaped the history of childbirth also shape this campus. The classroom cannot be a “safe space,” but my hope is that it can be a space of learning and growth.

In order to foster such a space, the following guidelines and discussion starters were developed by experienced social justice educators Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. These guidelines are “intended to recognize and respond to unequal power relations in the room, help more reticent students speak up, help more dominant students slow down, and guide open and humble entry into the conversation” (2014, p. 8).

### *Discussion Guidelines*

- Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas.
- Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience, study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility.
- Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader group-level patterns.
- Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off.
- Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor, other course members, and those whose work you study.
- Differentiate between safety and comfort. Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth.
- Keep focused on yourself, *What does this mean for me and my life?*
- Identify where your learning edge is and push it. For example, whenever you think, *I already know this*, ask yourself, *How can I take this deeper? Or, How am I applying in practice what I already know?*

### *Discussion Starters*

- I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable to say [X], but . . .
- From my experience/perspective as [identity], . . .
- I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let me know if I do, but . . .
- It feels risky to say [X], but . . .
- I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did . . .
- It seems like some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?

- Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?
- This is what I understand you to be saying:. . . Is that accurate?
- I've been wondering about how we are using [term] in this discussion . . .
- Is [X] a good example of what the author was saying?
- How would you respond to [X] from a reproductive justice framework?
- I am having a "yeah, but..." (sceptical/defensive) moment. Can you help me work through it?
- What is another example of [X]?
- This perspective is new to me, but I'm wondering if it is accurate to say that . . . ?

Adapted from Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education. Democracy and Education 22:1* (2014), p. 8.

### **Assignment submission and late work**

Assignments are due by 2 pm on the due date as an upload to Canvas. Email attachments will not be accepted except as a time stamp (e.g. if Canvas is not functioning, send the assignment to me and then upload it later that day).

Late work will be accepted with a grade deduction of 10% every 24 hours. Unavoidable delays due to an emergency will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

### **Being present in class and life issues**

Attendance is required—and life also happens. If you are going to miss a class, please provide a one-(full) page, single-spaced written précis and response to the readings, emailed to me as an attachment, within 48 hours of the missed class start time.

If any problems arise, either academic or personal, that might jeopardize your participation in the course, please try to inform me of the problem and set up an appointment with me as soon as possible.

### **Disability Access**

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations in GWS 533, students must first be registered with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<http://www.mcburney.wisc.edu/>). Students who have or think they may have a disability are invited to contact the McBurney Center for a confidential discussion at 608-263-2741 (phone), 608-225-7956 (text), or by email at [mcburney@studentlife.wisc.edu](mailto:mcburney@studentlife.wisc.edu).

If you have already registered with the McBurney Center, and if you wish to request any accommodations on the basis of disability, you should schedule an office appointment with me within the first two weeks of the semester. Please schedule this office appointment by email. To maintain

the confidentiality of your request, please do not approach me before or after class to discuss your accommodation needs. You should bring a copy of your service plan to our meeting.

Please note that I am unlikely to honor an accommodation request made within 72 hours of an assignment due date. Advanced planning on your part enables both of us to create an accessible classroom environment. Please do not delay in contacting me regarding your accommodation requests.

### **Academic Honesty**

Students are required to familiarize themselves with the UW policies on plagiarism and to assume responsibility for honesty in all course work.

### **Grading:**

Participation	20%
Reflection Paper	15%
Critical Engagement Paper	20%
Oral History Project	30%
Take-Home Final	15%

### **Honors option**

Additional assignment: Narratives of Reproductive Justice in Wisconsin ~7 page analysis paper, based on oral history interview with a reproductive justice organizer/practitioner in Wisconsin. Interview subject cannot be a course visitor. You must meet at least once with the Oral History Program staff to plan your interview.

### **Required Reading:** (Available at Room of One's Own)

Ina May Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth* (Bantam Books, 2003)

Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America 1750-1950* (Oxford University Press paperback)

Julia Chinyere Oparah and Alicia Bonaparte, eds, *Birth Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*

Miriam Zoila Perez, *Radical Doula Guide*

Margaret Charles Smith and Linda Janet Holmes, *Listen to Me Good: The Life Story of an Alabama Midwife* (Ohio State University Press paper).

## **Class Schedule Fall 2017**

Week 1 Introduction

W September 6

Introductory discussion, syllabus review

\*\*Friday, September 8, 7 pm: Professor Judy Leavitt, in conversation about the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *Brought to Bed*, at Mystery to Me bookstore, 1863 Monroe Street, Madison

## **Reproductive Justice**

Week 2

M September 11

Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017), 1-57

W September 13

*Reproductive Justice*, 58-96

Week 3

M September 18

*Reproductive Justice*, 97-116, 238-266

Julia Chinyere Oparah, Introduction: Beyond Coercion and Malign Neglect: Black Women and the Struggle for Birth Justice, in Bonaparte and Oparah, *Birthing Justice: Black Women, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*, 1-18.

W September 20

*Birthing Justice* selections:

Syrus Marcus Ware, Confessions of a Black Pregnant Dad, 63-71

Christ-Ann Magloire and Julia Chinyere Oparah, Unexpected Allies:

Obstetrician Activism, VBACs, and the Birth Justice Movement, 156-165

Priscilla Ocen and Julia Chinyere Oparah, Beyond Shackling: Prisons, Pregnancy, and the Struggle for Birth Justice, 187-197.

\*\*ASSIGNMENT 1: REFLECTION PAPER DUE

## **Alternative Birth: Critical Engagement**

Week 4

M September 25

Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide*, xi-74, 98-99

W September 27

Gaskin, *Ina May's Guide*, 133-182

*Williams Obstetrics*, 24<sup>th</sup> ed., Ch 22, Introduction through "Management of Normal Labor" (online through library)

Week 5  
M October 2  
*Ina May's Guide* 183-247

W October 4  
*Ina May's Guide* 248-273  
*Williams Obstetrics*, 24<sup>th</sup> ed., Ch 27, (online), Introduction through "Occiput Anterior Position," and "Fourth Stage of Labor"

Week 6  
M October 9  
*Ina May's Guide*, 274-304  
In-class video and discussion: *The Farm*

W October 11  
*Ina May's Guide*, 305-330  
Guest visitor: Gretchen Spicer, CPM  
\*\*ASSIGNMENT 2: CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT PAPER DUE

### **Writing Birth Histories I:**

Week 7  
M October 16  
Oral History Workshop: Troy Reeves, UW Oral History Program  
Oral history readings TBD

W October 18  
Leavitt, *Brought to Bed*, Introduction and Ch. 1, 1-35  
Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004), selection

Week 8  
M October 23  
*Brought to Bed*, Ch. 2  
Rachel Dudley, Toward an Understanding of the 'Medical Plantation' as a Cultural Location of Disability, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32 (4): 2012.

W October 25  
*Brought to Bed*, Ch. 3  
Laura Briggs, The Race of Hysteria: "Overcivilization" and the "Savage" Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology. *American Quarterly* 52:2 (2000): 246-267.

Week 9  
M October 30  
*Brought to Bed*, Ch. 4

Sharla Fett, *Consciousness and Calling: African American Midwives at Work in the Antebellum South*. In *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, edited by Edward Baptist and Stephanie Camp (2006).

W November 1

*Brought to Bed*, Ch 5

Susan Smith, *Japanese American Midwives* (2005), selection

\*\*ASSIGNMENT 3a: ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT DUE

Week 10

M November 6

*Brought to Bed*, Chs. 7-8

Gertrude Fraser, *Modern Bodies, Modern Minds: Midwifery and Reproductive Change in an African American Community*. In *Conceiving the New World Order*, edited by Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1995).

### **Writing Birth Histories II: Testimonies**

W November 8

Smith and Holmes, *Listen to Me Good* (pages TBD)

Week 11

M November 13

*Listen to Me Good* (pages TBD)

W November 15

Katsi Cook, interview selection

Silliman, Jael, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena Gutierrez. Ch. 6, *Native American Women Resist Genocide and Organize for Reproductive Rights*, in *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (2004), 105-117.

Week 12

M November 20

Heather Kuttai, *Maternity Rolls: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Disability* (2010), selection

W November 22

Trevor MacDonald, *Where's the Mother? Stories from a Transgender Dad* (2016), selection

\*\*ASSIGNMENT 3b: ORAL HISTORY PAPER DUE

### **The politics of birth work**

Course visitors during this unit will include:

Tehmina Islam, CPM  
Access Midwifery

Tia Murray, BS, CLC  
Birth & Postpartum Doula, Birthwise Doula Services,  
Certified Lactation Counselor  
UW Infant, Early Childhood, & Family Mental Health Fellow

Kristen Kali, CPM, Maia Midwifery, Seattle, WA

Week 13

M November 27

Suzanne Arms, *Immaculate Deception*, selection

Sheryl Nestel "Other" Mothers: Race and Representation in Natural  
Childbirth Discourse. *Resources for Feminist Research* 23:4(1994): 5-19.

W November 29

Heather Sinclair, *Birth City* (dissertation, University of Texas at El Paso, 2015),  
selection

In-class video and discussion, *Catching Babies*

Week 14

M December 4

Perez, *Radical Doula Guide*

Midwives of Standing Rock video

W December 6

*Black Women Birthing Justice*, selections

Week 15

M December 11

*Black Women Birthing Justice*, selections

Additional readings TBD

W December 13 Final discussion and send-off