

Stobie, Caitlin E. *Abortion Ecologies in Southern African Fiction: Transforming Reproductive Agency*. Bloomsbury. 2023. £85.00 (cloth) £28.99 (pbk) £76.50 (ebk). ISBN 9781350250192

Caitlin E. Stobie's *Abortion Ecologies in Southern African Fiction: Transforming Reproductive Agency* is a timely and thoughtful analysis of representations of abortion and agency in Southern African fiction. Locating itself at the critical intersections of new materialism, feminism, and postcolonialism, Stobie's monograph interrogates abortion narratives in texts by four pioneering southern African authors: Wilma Stockenström, Zoë Wicomb, Yvonne Vera, and Bessie Head. Approaching these works through a queer ecological perspective, Stobie analyses creative representations of abortion literature published between the late 1970s and 1990s.

Through these different narratives, Stobie unpacks and grapples not only with the representations and depictions of abortion but with how reproduction and agency are framed and located within their political and ecological contexts. Departing from mainstream debates and evocations of 'choice', Stobie utilises a broader and more critical approach to engage with 'agency' in abortion writing. She embeds her approach to agency in materiality "[...] or biological perspectives on interconnected embodiments" (p. 6) that are reflective not just of physical desires but of ethico-political ones too. With this alternative conceptualisation of agency, Stobie uses Southern African fiction to challenge current myopic and individualistic framings of agency, arguing instead for a communal and collective sense of agency.

Stobie aims to "develop a continuum of abortion ecologies" (p. 16), and this engagement with queer ecology is reflected in how the chapters are organised - Animals (Chapter 1), Plants (Chapter 2), Minerals (Chapter 3), and Humans (Chapter 4). Her analysis highlights how Wicomb and Head, whose works are the focus in the chapters "Plants" and "Humans" respectively, operationalise different ecological metaphors to understand desires, disgust, and negation. In "Plants", Stobie unpacks how Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* redefines desire in abortion narratives through a weaving of plants and the female body, with women in the novel embracing desire "through a metaphor of vegetal excess" (p. 98). These serve to consider how abortion and reproduction can be understood away from the narratives and framings that dominant discourses, are rooted in stigma, and cannot be separated from their social, political, historical, ecological, and colonial contexts.

Perhaps the biggest contribution of the monograph and central argument is how abortion fiction provides a mode of understanding agency that transcends the boundaries and limitations of existing feminist conceptualisations. In the chapter "Animals", Stobie interrogates how Stockenström's *Expedition to the Baobab Tree* uses a "beastly narrative" to consider the generative potential of an interspecies approach to critiquing anthropocentric notions of agency. Stobie uses abortion ecologies to consider how Southern African abortion narratives challenge and redefine agency away from either new materialist or postcolonial conceptualisations, creating alternative pathways that reject and resist both masculine narrative traditions as well as dominant feminist focus on the human. Rather than a process

of power holding, agency is a continuum, simultaneously non-anthropocentric and yet deeply political.

Stobie's work is especially interesting for the ways that it travels across disciplinary boundaries, from the humanities to the social sciences and beyond. In highlighting how "Southern African fiction treats abortion as a political and ethical issue" (p. 3), Stobie's analysis relates to ongoing projects that tie the social, political, and cultural to reproduction. In queering normativity and challenging the conceptualisation of agency in reproduction, Stobie spotlights the necessary complexities of reproduction and essential need to circumnavigate persistent universalisations of experience. Abortion as political could be taken further in the monograph, and expanding on key social science theorising (some of which is briefly engaged with in the text) like Reproductive Justice, precariousness, reprofuturism, and repronormativity amongst others could allow for that.

Stobie's work connects to the ongoing push for the understanding of how reproduction is inextricably tied to social injustice, articulated by feminist Women of Colour in the USA like the Combahee River Collective and the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice collective. Stobie's focus on the need to move beyond logics of pro- or anti-abortion politics, that she interrogated through Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, resonates with the move by racialised people to resist hegemonic narratives of 'choice' in abortion that emanated from particular White and classed movements in a specific space and time. Stobie also describes how Wicomb grapples with the ethical implications of parenting in an apartheid system; compelling a consideration of what it means to parent in safe and sustainable communities as Loretta Ross and SisterSong have argued in their influential work on Reproductive Justice. Furthering and deepening the productive power of understanding abortion through Reproductive Justice allows a more explicit and direct rejection of any linear association between legality and abortion access, a point which is parsed out through the monograph.

Stobie asserts, "[...] fiction seems closer to developing critical approaches to abortion than social theory itself" (p. 31). The novelists in this study queer heteronormative conceptualisations of reproduction, foregrounding what Stobie calls the "transcorporeal and gender inclusive perspective on gestationality" (p. 185) which destabilises normative and biomedical ideas of gestation, reproduction, and parenthood. Yet, reading this text as critical social scientists working on abortion, much of the deconstruction of repronormativity that emerges in Stobie's work is present in many social theories and research such as the decolonial and critical thinking of Sylvia Tamale, Stella Nyanzi, and others. This research has long challenged the normative thinking of reproduction that is located in Global North perspectives and then transposed universally. Indeed, it speaks to the ongoing critiques within social science that seek to trouble how reproduction is understood and the need to recognise an important and necessary blurriness in understandings that can be (in)congruous with dominant biomedical framings. While fiction offers a lot of imaginative and creative space for developing critical approaches, social science and theory too have offered similar notions of futurism (p. 153), ecologies, communal and collective, and a critique of "choice" in abortion narratives and research.

Stobie's work highlights the importance of abortion narratives in fiction, and the possibilities that come with analysing these narratives to further theoretical and conceptual

understandings of reproduction. The monograph unequivocally evidences the generative potential of unpacking depictions of abortion in fiction, and how fiction can develop “critical approaches to abortion” (p. 31) that challenge and ask questions of medicalised framings that have significant salience in abortion discourses. Abortion fiction is a space where “women of colour... express frustration with restricted reproductive agency” (p. 78), navigating political oppression and injustices. Such an advance of the potential of analysing fiction to further understandings of abortion and reproduction are essential. As Stobie writes, it is through such approaches that abortion can truly be understood to signal a “plethora of new possibilities” (p. 35).

This book will be of interest to abortion and reproduction scholars but will particularly appeal to colleagues in medical humanities and philosophy. Social scientists and sociologists may find some of the ideas and provocations in this monograph enlightening too.

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