

THE RHETORICS OF U.S. ABORTION NARRATIVES: THEMATIC
CONTINUITIES, SHIFTING APPLICATIONS AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES,
1969-PRESENT

by

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Great-Aunt Sophia Hasselhop, who died from an illegal abortion in 1927, at the age of twenty-six. I don't see it as a coincidence that, at the time of writing this, I am also twenty-six years old. Engaged to be married at the time of her death, Sophie is remembered as a wild woman who loved to have a good time—dancing, laughing and always smiling.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the various forces that have shaped the form, content, utilization and emergence of abortion narratives—both within a historical context and for political value. By comparing the themes that emerge within and across three sets of narratives—anti-abortion narratives, pre-*Roe* narratives that support abortion rights, and post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives—and by identifying both gaps and influxes in the use of narratives, this thesis argues that the content and utilization of abortion narratives is directly connected to broader discursive strategies and political ideologies of reproductive rights organizations.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, I was working for the White Earth Land Recovery Project, a reservation-based non-profit organization on the White Earth Reservation in northwestern Minnesota. Prior to moving to White Earth, I had worked with NARAL Pro-Choice Minnesota, and was very excited when in the Spring of 2006 I received a call from national NARAL offering me an opportunity to go home to South Dakota to work on the campaign which sought to overturn the abortion ban, that had passed the House and Senate and had been signed into law by Governor Rounds, by referring the issue back to the voters.

While I was on the ground collecting signatures in South Dakota, and especially in reflecting on the experience later, I noticed something that I hadn't previously noticed when working in Minnesota for reproductive rights. Personal accounts were a visible and public part of the anti-abortion campaign, but these narratives were not being utilized as part of the abortion-rights political strategy. I must admit that at first, I was outraged at anti-abortion claims that abortion hurts women and use of personal narrative to substantiate this position. I felt like a feminist strategy had been co-opted for anti-feminist purposes. But my frustration was largely forgotten as I started to ask bigger questions: Why wasn't the campaign I was working for using these narratives? Why did the anti-abortion camp utilize feminist language and personal experience in arguing against abortion rights? And why were we so afraid of using these same tactics?

As I began this research, closely reading hundreds of stories about abortion experiences over and over again, additional questions surfaced and have shaped the ways I conducted my research and the ways in which my analysis emerged. These include:

Who is telling these stories—why, when and how are they doing so? Where are the narratives emerging? How is this different from the ways in which narratives have been used historically? Are abortion narratives seen as a (useful) strategy for gaining rights? How does this goal impact and/or thwart the liberatory potential of narratives? Why does it appear that the emergence of abortion narratives has shifted over time, marked by great periods of non-existence and also large influxes? And perhaps most importantly, what forces have shaped and continue to shape the content, emergence and utilization of abortion narratives?

This thesis seeks to answer these questions by analyzing one specific rhetorical strategy employed by reproductive rights organizations as well as individual advocates for abortion rights: the use of women’s first-person accounts of their personal experiences with abortion—described from here on out simply as “abortion narratives.” There are three major components to this analysis, and thus the thesis is broken up into three long chapters with many subheadings and subpoints.

In the first chapter, I seek to understand the form and content of abortion narratives. To meet this end, I compare four themes that emerge within three sets of narratives—abortion-rights narratives on experiences with pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, abortion-rights narratives on experiences with post-*Roe* legal abortions, and anti-abortion narratives—that are generally marked as inherently different. The themes I identify, describe and analyze include: characterizations of clinic staff and abortionists; physical pain associated with the procedure; alternative options; and centralization of the abortion experience to the remainder of the woman’s life. By identifying themes across narratives

as well as within a particular type of narrative, it becomes possible to identify shifts in themes over time, based partially in the varying political perspectives of the women sharing their stories, partially on the time period in which the woman obtained the abortion, and partially on the historical moment in which the woman remembered and constructed the narrative representation of her experience—as well as the discourses that were evident within a particular historical period and the discourses accepted to describe a particular worldview or political ideology.

To be more explicit: Chapter One seeks to put various types of abortion narratives in dialogue with one another. The few academic texts that have analyzed the content of abortion narratives tend to focus specifically on one type of abortion narrative. In fact, I have not identified any scholarship that makes a distinction among narratives; in other words, it does not appear that any scholarship takes seriously the differences that may emerge among first-person accounts of experiences with abortion based on the historical moment in which the abortion was obtained or remembered or the political ideologies and goals of the women sharing their stories. By comparing narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions that support the right to legal abortion, post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives, and anti-abortion narratives, it is possible to more thoroughly analyze the evident themes as well as the forces that shape this content. As will be shown within Chapter One, certain themes are evident within pre-*Roe* narratives on illegal abortion that disappear within post-*Roe* narratives on legal abortion that support abortion rights. By comparing these two sets of narratives alone, one could assume that the shift in the content of abortion narratives can be accounted for by the shift in the legality of abortion;

however, by comparing both sets of abortion-rights narratives (pre- and post-*Roe*) to anti-abortion narratives, it becomes clear that many of the themes that are present within pre-*Roe* narratives on illegal abortion emerge in anti-abortion narratives, refuting potential claims that shifts in content are related alone to the legality of the procedure. Therefore, by creating categories of abortion narratives and analyzing the themes that emerge within these various groups, it is possible to more fully account for the various forces that have shaped the content and utilization of narratives. Again, I have not found any existing literature that seeks to categorize abortion narratives or compares a wide variety of narratives—and I believe that by comparing anti-abortion narratives to narratives in support of abortion rights, we are able to gain a better understanding of both the content of narratives and the discursive, political and historical forces that shape this content.

Chapter Two tracks how narratives have been used historically and how they are being utilized contemporarily in the public fight for abortion rights. In order to assess the obvious gaps and influxes in the production and publication of narratives, I argue that the dominant discourses used by reproductive rights organizations and campaigns at various points in history impact the ways in which narratives emerge publicly. I begin this discussion by offering a fairly detailed account of the dominant discourses deployed by reproductive rights organizations in the 1960's and 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's. By lining up the influxes of narratives with specific rhetorical strategies, I argue that the use of narratives by reproductive rights organizations is directly connected to their broader public discourses.

Chapter three is dedicated to analyzing the ways in which abortion narratives are being used currently. I analyze the discourses surrounding the 2006 abortion ban in South Dakota in order to create a tangible example of the points I make throughout Chapter Two. I look specifically at the ways that both the anti-abortion and abortion-rights campaigns do and do not incorporate women's narratives into their broader strategies, arguing that the woman-centered discourses evident within the Vote Yes For Life campaign create a space where women's narratives can emerge, while the pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government intrusion rhetoric dominating the public discourses of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families neither centralizes women nor utilizes their abortion stories as a strategy to defend abortion rights. This raises a particularly important question about the discursive strategies of reproductive rights organizations: Are women-centered discourses a necessary part of successful struggles and long-term strategies to maintain abortion rights?

Within Chapter Three, I also begin to explore a less dominant, but still visible discourse that impacted events around South Dakota's abortion ban. By considering the differences in the rhetorics of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families and Indigenous abortion-rights supporters, I provide an example of an alternative narrative discourse that exists outside of the typical "pro-choice" vs "pro-life" binary that dominates so much of the public discussion on abortion.

To really understand Chapter One as well as the subsequent chapters, it is important to know what scholars have previously written about abortion narratives.

In addition to the more popular collections of abortion narratives that predominately focus on illegal abortion, I have found four academic texts (three essays and a book) that analyze abortion narratives or the ways in which women in the United States have discussed their abortion experiences: Lisa Avalos conducted interviews with twenty women (though her article offers the stories of four of them as representative of the rest of her sample) in order to understand how women come to remember their abortion experiences in the years following the procedure¹; Helen Susan Edelman focuses on the sacrifices that abortion signifies for some women by analyzing the stories of (an undisclosed number of) women she interviewed;² *Abortion: A Collective Story*, based on thirteen interviews conducted by Cara MariAnna, outlines the benefits of viewing individual narratives as part of a broader collective story³; in “Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings’ Abortion Speak-Out of 1969,” the only article that does not look at narratives collected by the author, Tasha Dubriwny analyzes the rhetorical strategies and content of the Redstockings’ 1969 abortion speak-out in order to further a theory of what collective rhetoric is.⁴

The authors of each of these texts come from a position that assumes sharing one’s abortion experience leads to positive personal and societal outcomes. Edelman

¹ Avalos, Lisa. “Hindsight and the Abortion Experience: What Abortion Means to Women Years Later,” *Gender Issues* Vol 17, Iss 2, (1999): 35-58.

² Edelman, Helen Susan. “Safe to Talk: Abortion Narrative as a Rite of Return.” *Journal of American Culture* Vol 19, Iss 4, (1996): pgs 29-40.

³ MariAnna, Cara. *Abortion: A Collective Story*. (Westport CT, Praeger Publishers: 2002).

⁴ Dubriwny, Tasha. “Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings’ Abortion Speak-Out of 1969.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol 91, No 4, (2005): 395-422.

argues, “the act of telling the story represented significant power for these women.”⁵ For Edelman, the benefit to story-telling goes beyond the individual. She frames “abortion folklore as counter-discourse” that has the potential to remedy the alienation some women feel after abortion as a result of, according to Edelman, society-imposed silence. “As a feminist strategy, creating abortion folklore reframes and mobilizes silence, calling for visibility and active resistance that endow women who choose abortion with a voice—and a safe place to shout.”⁶ For Edelman and others, speaking out about one’s abortion experience is not only a liberatory way to overcome personal silence, but actually reflects feminist ideologies and broader possibilities for resistance.

Cara MariAnna also agrees with the power of personal story-telling, and claims that it is viewing these individual narratives as part of a larger collective story that holds the possibility for reframing the abortion debate.

With an adequately diverse and detailed collective story, we can more easily negotiate the difficult and divisive discourses that surround abortion. There are never too many stories to be heard, and the collective narrative becomes increasingly useful to us when more voices are added to it. Though there is no final word to be said about abortion, it is nevertheless clear that personal stories are important and constitute the ground of a narrative tradition that is a rich source of information and knowledge about women’s lives.⁷

MariAnna’s quote highlights an important point: these authors go beyond assuming that speaking-out is beneficial for individual women to argue for the possibilities associated with reading these individual narratives as one larger collective narrative. This collective

⁵ Edelman, Helen Susan. “Safe to Talk: Abortion Narrative as a Rite of Return.” *Journal of American Culture* Vol 19, Iss 4, (1996): 35.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ MariAnna, Cara. *Abortion: A Collective Story*. (Westport CT, Praeger Publishers: 2002), xiii.

story is able to emerge because, according to these texts, the individual narratives have significant themes in common. Even though the terms “collective story” (MariAnna) and “collective rhetoric” (Dubriwny) are not utilized by Edelman or Avalos, both of these authors also discuss the similarities across—rather than the differences between—the narratives they collect and analyze. For example, Edelman states, “By looking at disparate narratives and finding common themes, we seek a structure and unity of narrative in our experiences of the world...”⁸ Edelman’s quote highlights an important point: all four of these essays that analyze the text of abortion narratives either seek or assume collectivity among the stories.

To be clear, this assumption of collectivity among a set of narratives should not suggest that all of the authors identify common themes across their project; in fact, each of the authors highlight radically different themes. In her discussion of mourning and loss, Edelman identifies several themes among her participants’ responses: the necessity of sharing the experience; an understanding that one only shares this experience with a small number of specific people; the need to mourn and the ways in which silence and secrecy prevents this; the ways in which narratives tell us something about the present situation of the woman, as well as her abortion experience; and above all the ways in which story-telling is a way to overcome silence and marginalization.⁹

In her discussion on the construction and framing of past abortions, Lisa Avalos analyzes the “range of satisfaction levels and emotional reactions toward the abortion

⁸ Edelman, Helen Susan. “Safe to Talk: Abortion Narrative as a Rite of Return.” *Journal of American Culture* Vol 19, Iss 4, (1996): 30.

⁹ Ibid.

experience that [interviewees] demonstrate.”¹⁰ In order to do so, she identifies four ways in which women who have an abortion will reflect back on their experience: with satisfaction, as “mild struggles with loss over time,” with “depth, complexity and grief,” or—as she frames the experiences of the most regretful women—“seeking a safe place to explore buried emotions.” One of the most important contributions of Avalos’s text is her point that “women’s retrospective understandings of abortion are not static and unchanging, nor are meanings the same for all women. Women’s accounts of their abortions are socially constructed, taking on meaning within the social contexts surrounding them, both at the time of the abortion and in subsequent years and life stages.”¹¹ This is particularly helpful as I analyzed the content and emergence of narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, as the gap between the abortion experience and the production of the narrative is never mentioned by any of the women sharing their stories as part of an abortion-rights platform. In other words, as Avalos points out, the ways in which women remember their abortions is as socially constructed and situated as the experience itself.

Though Avalos does argue that the meanings individual women construct around their experiences will differ, she limits the discussion of difference to the four ways women reflect on their experiences. This lack of discussion of the various time periods in which women obtained their abortions is especially curious considering that one of the four narratives she uses to represent the twenty interviews is from a woman who had an

¹⁰ Avalos, Lisa. “Hindsight and the Abortion Experience: What Abortion Means to Women Years Later,” *Gender Issues* Vol 17, Iss 2, (1999): 35-58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

illegal abortion. If one believes that meaning is constructed in multiple ways through various time periods, how is it possible to acknowledge the differences in the ways a story is constructed without considering the different contexts within which the abortion was obtained? Though Avalos (and each of the other three authors) acknowledges the ways in which a collective story or a collective experience must be diverse enough to account for differences in experiences, each of the authors continues to focus on the similarities in the women's narratives.

In a more complex discussion of collective rhetoric, Tasha Dubriwny highlights themes in both rhetorical strategies utilized by women sharing their experiences as well as themes within the content of the narratives. According to Dubriwny, the Redstockings used irony, humor and symbolic reversal as rhetorical devices in order to “refram[e] the practice of abortion”¹² and to “refram[e] women’s identity.”¹³ Most importantly for my purposes is Dubriwny’s “theory of collective rhetoric [which] models a process of persuasion that envisions the creation of novel public vocabularies as the product of the collective articulation of multiple, overlapping individual experiences.”¹⁴ Of course, just because experiences are overlapping does not mean that they are identical—though Dubriwny goes on to discuss the similarities across the Redstockings’ narratives, rather than any differences that may also exist.¹⁵

¹² Dubriwny, Tasha. “Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings’ Abortion Speak-Out of 1969.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol 91, No 4, (2005):410.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹⁵ Of course, unlike the projects of the other three authors discussed here, Dubriwny does not attempt to understand what the narratives say about women’s experiences or lives; instead, she focuses as much on the form of the Redstockings speak-out as she does on the content of the narratives, arguing that the speak-out models the ways in which collective rhetorics come to be.

While highlighting the themes that emerge across a single set of interviews and/or narratives is undoubtedly a valuable project, I argue that the collectivity among narratives that each essay assumes is undermined for several reasons: aside from Dubriwny, each of the authors makes their claims based on a relatively small number of interviews they conducted specifically for this project; none of the authors take into account the many other narratives that exist aside from the interviews they have conducted and/or narratives they are analyzing—in fact, not a single author mentions that other abortion narratives exist; none situate their discussion within a broader understanding of how narratives have been used historically—or mention that abortion narratives have been used by reproductive rights organizations to argue for rights in the past. Despite this, each of the authors argue that their method—viewing abortion narratives as a collective story or collective rhetoric, asking women to reflect on and create meaning around a previous abortion or acknowledging the ways in which, for some women, abortion can represent sacrifice—has the capability of expanding the current discourses around abortion through understanding the connections among shared stories and experiences.

Unfortunately, in ignoring the existence and previous utilization of other abortion narratives, the authors' calls for women to share their abortion experiences seems both premature and superficial. From reading any of the three accounts that are based on the author's interviews, one would assume that no one had ever conducted such interviews before, that a complete silence surrounds abortion and also that narratives have never before been used in an attempt to broaden the discourses around abortion. The complete lack of discussion of any other abortion narratives is perplexing and disturbing as it both

perpetuates the myth that abortion is surrounded by secrecy and silence and also removes these narratives from a broader context of narratives.

With these limits in mind, the collectivity among narratives assumed implicitly or outlined explicitly within these four articles cannot account for continuities in narratives that emerge from various historical periods and also cannot account for divergences within a specific set of narratives. The first chapter highlights the ways that themes emerge consistently across different types of narratives, though these themes often shift considerably from one group to the next. For example, the issue of alternatives to abortion exists in each group: in narratives of pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, marriage or unwed mothers' homes are the dominant alternatives while in narratives of post-*Roe* legal abortions, single parenthood emerges as the only real alternative worth serious consideration. Another shift occurs in the ways that women frame their decision-making process; in the narratives on illegal abortion the women tend to frame their decision as a serious process, while the women sharing their post-*Roe* narratives do not centralize this aspect of their process to obtain the abortion. Without comparing various sets of narratives, these shifting continuities are lost.

In order to both expand the scope of previous claims of collectivity and also to challenge the idea that individual abortion narratives can be reduced to one "collective story," I conduct a close reading of four themes that emerge in three different sets of narratives. By looking at a variety of abortion narratives in a broader context, it becomes obvious that certain themes do tend to emerge in more than one type of abortion narrative

and also that certain themes are only evident in a single set of narratives, which simultaneously argues both for and against the notion of “collectivity.”

Though I do not explicitly connect the problems with academic conceptions of a collective narrative to my project, seeking to understand the limits and benefits of a collective narrative has greatly informed this project. While I do not make claims regarding whether or not the themes I outline constitute a reading of the material as one collective story, I believe that the close reading I conduct both underscores the fact that similar themes do emerge within one set of narratives and across narratives that have been considered inherently different (suggesting, to some extent, a level of collectivity) and also challenges this idea by showing that certain themes emerge only in a single type of narrative.

Though I cannot deny that similar themes emerge again and again, my reading of “collectivity” within the narratives differs from the claims made within the articles just outlined largely because of what we attribute the similarities of the narratives to. The question then becomes: what accounts for this overwhelming level of consistency, this formulaic presentation of narratives? I believe that similar themes emerge because the women are constructing their experiences within a particular historical moment, from a particular ideological and political position, and by utilizing an accepted discursive system; Edelman, Avalos and MariAnna seem to believe that women construct similar narratives because they had similar experiences with abortion. To some extent, then, our goals are quite different; I seek to understand the ways in which the content, emergence and utilization of abortion narratives is connected to political struggles and the discourses

of dominant reproductive rights organizations. On the contrary, MariAnna states that her “project is an exercise in reading abortion narratives for what they have to say about women’s lives.”¹⁶ Perhaps this begins to explain the divide in our approaches to analyzing narratives: I believe that the content and emergence of narratives tells us more about political strategies and discursive systems than it does about women’s material realities; on the other hand, Avalos, MariAnna and Edelman conducted interviews, carefully interpreted data and came to view their participants as having enough commonalities in their experiences to warrant some level of “collectivity.”

A Note on Terminology

It is generally understood among advocates in support of abortion rights that the terms “reproductive justice”¹⁷ and “reproductive rights” will refer to a set of broader issues surrounding reproductive health care, including but not limited to: abstinence-only sex education, “Crisis Pregnancy Centers,” the newly doubled costs of some oral contraceptives, the prevalence of environmental toxins in breastmilk, forced sterilizations, creation of laws that increase the difficulty for same-sex families to adopt, lack of access to abortion for low-income women and women of color, and poverty that prevents women from both making the decision to bear a child and also the ability to raise a child. Major reproductive rights organizations have acknowledged that each of these issues falls under the umbrella that defines reproductive rights. For example,

¹⁶ MariAnna, Cara. *Abortion: A Collective Story*. (Westport CT, Praeger Publishers: 2002), x.

¹⁷ The term “reproductive justice” was coined by women of color in order to make clear that abortion is not the sole issue in regards to reproductive rights.

women have the individual right to be able to breast feed without fear of transmitting environmental toxins to their children. Women have the right to be able to bear children in a manner they—rather than their doctor—choose, just as women have the right to choose to end a pregnancy. And LGBTQ people have the right to adopt a child in way that does not differ from that of heterosexual women, married or single. Perhaps it is useful to think of issues surrounding abortion as one mere spoke of the reproductive rights umbrella.

While the terms “reproductive rights” and “reproductive justice” refer to a broad scope of issues, in this thesis I use them with a much more limited intent. In other words, I often use the phrase “reproductive rights” in relation to both individuals and organizations. It is true that often these very groups and individuals believe in reproductive justice, but in this thesis I am specifically looking to their work around abortion rights. For example, NARAL now supports and lobbies for a range of issues dealing with reproductive health care and rights. Likewise, many of the supporters of the Vote Yes For Life anti-abortion campaign in South Dakota also support moves to refuse rape survivors emergency contraception; however, this thesis does not seriously consider the discourses used by reproductive rights organizations outside of their discussions on abortion.

To be clear, this thesis focuses specifically on the dominant discourses surrounding abortion and the ways in which the use of abortion narratives is impacted by these public rhetorics. I chose to use the terms “abortion-rights” and “anti-abortion” to describe those that actively take a position on the issue, and will attempt to refrain from

falling back into the familiar, polarizing and dichotomous language of “pro-choice” and “pro-life.” While critics could validly argue that this strategy—replacing the terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life” with terms that focus specifically on abortion—simply normalizes the privileged position that abortion has held within the reproductive rights movement, my choice of terminology actually seeks to avoid this issue. By discussing the abortion-rights discourses within a more limited scope, I hope to avoid describing reproductive freedom simply in terms of abortion rights.

CHAPTER 1: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS WITHIN AND ACROSS NARRATIVES:
IDENTIFYING THE FORM AND CONTENT OF ABORTION STORIES

Though quite a lot of feminist, popular and academic writing on abortion exists, little attention has been paid to the use of personal narrative—either in a historical context or for political value. As shown in the introduction to this thesis, the few academic articles that address the issue of abortion narratives focus on identifying the commonalities among narratives that fall into a specific group, though from reading these texts, one would never know that narratives outside of those being analyzed in a specific text even exist. In other words, none of the texts I've found that analyze abortion narratives situate their claims within a broader understanding of the larger genre of abortion narratives, the history of abortion, the discourses surrounding abortion, or the shifting use of narratives over time. This chapter implicitly responds to this gap by placing various types of first-person narrative accounts of abortion in relation to one another in order to analyze themes that emerge both within a particular type of narrative and also across lines that generally mark these same narratives as inherently different. In doing so, this chapter gives a detailed account of the form and content of abortion narratives, seeks to understand the forces that shape their form and content, and begins to acknowledge the political nature of abortion narratives.

Three Groups of Narratives

Each of the three sets of narratives I've chosen for this analysis comes from a different place; the post-*Roe* anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives come from two

different websites while the narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions come from two collections: The first, *Back Rooms: An Oral History of the Illegal Abortion Era*, was published in 1988. The second, *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops, and Children of Women Who Died Talk About its Horrors*, was published in 1993. Though these collections illuminate experiences with illegal abortion, they were published 15 and 20 years after legalization, clearly as a response to anti-abortion political gains—which means that all narratives I characterize as pre-*Roe* contain experiences of women that had an illegal abortion and support the right to legal abortion; so, what I’m classifying as “pre-*Roe* narratives” are narratives on illegal abortions, though it is important to remember that these stories were not collected until the mid-late 1980’s.¹⁸

While print collections of narratives on illegal abortion were published many years ago, no collections of solely post-1973 narratives exist yet. For this reason, the post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives I analyze in this thesis come from a website titled “I’m Not Sorry.” Patricia Beninato created the site after participating in an online conversation around the time of *Roe v. Wade*’s 30th anniversary. According to Beninato, she felt that the anti-abortion narratives posted online were not reflective of most women’s experiences with abortion. Beninato claims that when she conceived of creating this website in 2003, there were no other websites like it—which means that there is an

¹⁸ Since 2003, narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions can increasingly be found online. Though I do include a few narratives from the “I’m Not Sorry” website, which has a specific section titled “Before there was *Roe*,” the majority of the narratives I analyze come from the two print collections published in the late 1980’s/early 1990’s.

entire decade—from the late 80’s/early 90’s until 2003—that produced no mainstream published abortion narratives that support abortion rights.¹⁹

I chose to analyze narratives on the “I’m Not Sorry” site for specific reasons: it is not connected to a reproductive rights organization, which is reflective of the fact that most abortion-rights websites that make women’s abortion narratives central to their project are operated by individuals and not organizations. Secondly, it is explicitly “pro-choice” and does not allow anti-abortion narratives or viewpoints to be posted on the website. Unfortunately, I cannot argue that this is reflective of a trend among abortion narratives—in fact, to some extent, the opposite may be true; websites in support of abortion rights that are operated by organizations seem equally likely to post only positive abortion stories or to post all narratives regardless of the characterization of the abortion experience.²⁰ However, none of the other sets of narratives—anti-abortion, illegal abortion, or those narratives that appear on sites operated by individuals that support abortion rights—tend to combine narratives that both support and oppose abortion, and I wanted the three sets of narratives to parallel each other in this way for two reasons: it would have been extremely difficult to identify themes that emerge in a specific set of narratives if those narratives offered deeply conflicting accounts and secondly, because the sites that do allow both stories that support and oppose their

¹⁹ Again, I am only analyzing mainstream published accounts of abortion narratives. It is possible that feminist newspapers, pamphlets, and press or radical organizations were utilizing narratives in ways that dominant organizations were not at this time. This research does not address alternative media or discourses.

Though I claim that no narratives were published again until 2003, a second edition of *The Choices We Made* (originally published in 1991) was released in 2001. For a more detailed timeline of the historical usage of abortion narratives, please see Chapter Two of this thesis.

²⁰ Consider, as an example, the website operated by the Feminist Women’s Health Center.

position are less common, appearing namely on abortion-rights websites supported by reproductive rights organizations.

The third group of narratives I analyze are post-*Roe* anti-abortion narratives. I've chosen to analyze the narratives posted on "Abortion Concern," a website dedicated to women who have had negative experiences with abortion. It mirrors the "I'm Not Sorry" website in both of the ways I outlined above: it is operated by an individual and it only allows anti-abortion narratives to be posted. Yet, the narratives posted at Abortion Concern are NOT reflective of the dominant anti-abortion narrative, which tend to explicitly reference God, frame sex as something to be done solely within marriage, and discuss baby-killing with more gusto than the narratives posted at Abortion Concern; however these particular narratives do seem to be reflective of a growing subset of narratives that fall within the feminist anti-abortion position. Thus, I want to make it clear, especially in terms of the anti-abortion narratives I've chosen, that I am not making claims for all abortion narratives or for all contemporary representations of abortion—but rather, that my claims are limited to the narratives located in the books and websites I've just described.²¹

As stated, this project seeks to place various types of first-person narrative accounts of abortion in relation to one another in order to analyze themes that emerge both within a particular type of narrative and also across lines that generally mark these same narratives as inherently different, while also acknowledging the differences within a

²¹ Considering the methodology I utilize in analyzing the three sets of abortion narratives from three different locations, it is possible that my claims could be applied more broadly to all abortion-rights and anti-abortion narratives. However, because I have not adequately analyzed all types of abortion narratives (e.g. the more extreme anti-abortion narratives, feminist anti-abortion narratives), I am choosing to limit my claims. In future work, I hope to further contextualize the narratives I analyze in depth here.

specific set of narratives. In order to do this, I give a brief overview of the themes that emerge within abortion-rights narratives on illegal abortion, within post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives on legal abortion, and within anti-abortion narratives. I then conduct a close textual analysis of four of the themes that emerge in varying forms within each set of narratives.

Abortion-Rights Narratives on Experiences with Illegal Abortion

When looking at hundreds of abortion narratives, certain themes tend to emerge and become obvious. These themes tend to fall into one of two broader categories: description of what the entire abortion experience entailed or the ways in which the abortion fits into a broader life narrative of the individual sharing her experience. In abortion-rights narratives on illegal abortions, the following themes emerge regarding the description of the abortion itself: cost of procedure; type of person performing the abortion, including their qualities and characteristics; physical pain associated with the procedure; conditions of the physical space in which the abortion was performed; after-effects of the abortion and lack of medical care to deal with these problems; home remedies attempted; and feelings of terror, fear and a definite sense that they were risking their lives.

When discussing the ways in which the abortion fits into the broader life narrative of the woman sharing the story, the following are recurring issues: age at the time of the procedure; relationship with the father; religion; rape or her very first sexual experience that resulted in the pregnancy; the experience of going to an un-wed mothers' home—

both as an available alternative to abortion, or something she went through because she couldn't get an abortion; motherhood; lack of sex education and information on birth control—generally framed as a result of the ideas present during those “backwards” times, before the more liberated and knowledgeable present. This last point brings up an interesting issue: this group of narratives tends to suggest that women are better off today than at previous points in history, and this claim is often made through concentrating on *Roe*. Despite framing *Roe* as the giver of all reproductive freedom, in many of these narratives that reiterate this notion of progress, references to *Roe* are less than explicit, though still present.

Two themes are present within abortion rights narratives on illegal abortion that are difficult to place within this binary I've created: year of the procedure and guilt. In terms of the year of the procedure, this marker is used to describe *both* the conditions of the abortion as well as the point in the life of the woman seeking the abortion. The notion of guilt emerges in more complex ways. For example, most of the women that tell their stories as part of these collections explicitly state that they feel no guilt. Not one woman states she regrets her abortion. This expression of guiltlessness seems to traverse the abortion experience and impact the ways in which she positively frames the remainder of her life choices. On the other hand, the issue of guilt emerges frequently—but is simply not in regards to having an abortion. Women that share their experience of giving a child up for adoption often discuss the long-term guilt, pain and disruption this process caused. And many of the women sharing their stories of the illegal abortion era express guilt over getting pregnant, which seems closely connected to the overall decision to abort. In short,

guilt—whether it is expressed as guiltlessness or long-lasting guilt—serves as an example of a prominent theme within narratives on illegal abortion that is utilized in complex and, at times, contradictory ways.

Abortion-Rights Narratives on Experiences with Legal Abortion

Many of the themes evident within narratives on experiences with illegal abortion are present in a recycled and slightly altered way within the post-*Roe* narratives. These include: the woman's age at the time of the procedure; relationship with the father; motherhood (though in a much more central and sensationalized way than in pre-*Roe* narratives); qualities and characteristics of clinic staff; (lack of) physical pain associated with the procedure; and guilt (though this is much more likely to be expressed in terms of guiltlessness).

Certain themes outlined that emerge in the narratives on illegal abortion are not evident in post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives. These include: year of the procedure; conditions of the physical space in which the abortion was performed; after-effects of the abortion and lack of medical care to deal with these problems; home remedies attempted; and terror, fear and a definite sense that they were risking their lives. Considering these differences, it seems that the shift in themes evident in pre- to post-*Roe* narratives centers mostly around the actual abortion experience, rather than the ways that the abortion fits into the life narrative of the woman sharing her experience.

Just as certain themes are prevalent in pre-*Roe* narratives that are not found in post-*Roe* narratives, new issues emerge in post-*Roe* narratives that cannot be found in

narratives on illegal abortion. These themes tend to surround both alternatives to abortion (e.g. discussion of the option for single parenthood in post-*Roe* narratives rather than unwed mothers' homes) and also the reasons for the pregnancy (the failure rates and improper use of birth control in post-*Roe* narratives as opposed to the lack of information available on sex and contraceptives discussed frequently in the pre-*Roe* narratives). Lastly, narratives on experiences with legal abortion often mention the rights they are thankful for, but rarely frame this right in terms of *Roe* or a particular historical moment, unlike pre-*Roe* narratives, which (though they may not name *Roe* specifically) tend to acknowledge a specific historical point at which things changed or improved.

Anti-Abortion Narratives

As stated in the Introduction to this thesis, I have not found any scholarship that attempts to place anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives in dialogue with one another. In comparing themes that emerge in anti-abortion narratives to those present in pre- and post-*Roe* narratives written by women that support abortion rights, it becomes evident that considerable overlap exists in terms of the rhetorical strategies and content in both anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives. While current discourses around abortion mark anti-abortion advocates and abortion-rights supporters as polar opposites, this polarization can be challenged through conducting a close read of the themes present in both anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives. While definite differences between anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives are certainly expected and obvious, similar themes emerge in anti-abortion narratives that are present in both sets of narratives that

support abortion rights. These include: alternative options to abortion; qualities and characteristics of clinic staff; a description of the physical pain associated with the procedure; the woman's age at the time of the procedure (though the notion of "too young" is almost mocked in the anti-abortion narratives); relationship with the father; and motherhood (though motherhood is invoked in a way that more closely resembles its representation in post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives than in pre-*Roe* narratives—meaning that the notion of motherhood is more central to and sensationalized in both anti-abortion and abortion-rights post-*Roe* narratives than in the narratives on experiences with illegal abortions).

The themes that emerge in pre-*Roe* narratives that are not evident in post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives are also not present in post-*Roe* anti-abortion narratives. In other words, certain themes evident in narratives on illegal abortion do not appear in either set of post-*Roe* narratives. Again, these themes include: year of the procedure; conditions of the physical space in which the abortion was performed; after-effects of the abortion and lack of medical care to deal with these problems; home remedies attempted; terror, fear and a definite sense that they were risking their lives. Considering that these themes are only evident in narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, it seems that legality must account for many of these thematic shifts.

Yet, for those women who are sharing their abortion experiences as part of an anti-abortion ideology, they clearly do not feel that their experiences were improved by the legality of abortion. This is evident in the themes that emerge within anti-abortion narratives that cannot be found in either set of narratives that support abortion rights:

continuous and long-term crying; how far along the pregnancy was at the time of the procedure; seeking forgiveness from God, from the baby and from herself; how many years ago the procedure occurred, which is used to mark the length of time she has been experiencing abortion-related emotional pain.

Lastly, it appears that many themes evident in pre-*Roe* narratives on illegal abortion that are not present in post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives are, in fact, present in an altered manner within anti-abortion narratives. In many ways, anti-abortion narratives appear to be more similar to the narratives on illegal abortion than they are to post-*Roe* abortion narratives also shared online. This is particularly interesting because these themes cut across legality as well as political and ethical positions on abortion. Examples include: physical complications due to the procedure; negative characterizations of clinic staff, including discussions of abuse or assault by the staff; and intense guilt—though, as stated, the issue of guilt traverses many terrains. Rather than an adamant proclamation of guiltlessness that is evident in the post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives, guilt emerges in a manner similar to ways guilt is discussed in pre-*Roe* narratives; in anti-abortion narratives the woman identifies her guilt is a result of the abortion, rather than getting pregnant, and in the pre-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives the women blame their guilt on the pregnancy rather than the abortion.

A second example of the ways in which themes from pre-*Roe* narratives emerge slightly altered in the post-*Roe* anti-abortion narratives is evident in the utilization of time and dates. In pre-*Roe* narratives, the women almost always begin their story by naming the year in which they obtained the abortion. Using a similar structure, anti-abortion

narratives often begin by naming how many years ago the abortion occurred. Both types of narratives utilize the concept of time, though in different ways. For example, in pre-*Roe* narratives, women highlight the year of the procedure in order to situate their abortion within a broader historical period in which women did not have (abortion) rights. By comparing the year of their terrible abortion experience to so-called “better” contemporary times, the women invoke the notion of “progress.” While pre-*Roe* narratives characterize time as positive, women sharing anti-abortion narratives take the opposite position, showing that time has not healed their pain.

Now that I have outlined broad themes that emerge in abortion-rights narratives on illegal abortion, post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives and anti-abortion narratives, it should be clear that there is a great deal of overlap and difference in both the form and content of the narratives. Perhaps most importantly, by creating a system where narratives are categorized and then subsequently looking closely at the content of the narratives both within each category and across categories, it becomes possible to develop a much more complex and thorough understanding of abortion narratives.²² Viewing the three categories in relation to each other produces an understanding of the themes within the narratives that is much deeper than would be possible by looking at only one or two groups of stories. For example, in comparing the differences between both pre-1973 and post-*Roe* narratives that support abortion rights, one could easily assume that the

²² Because there is no academic or activist literature that has dissected the content of abortion narratives, there has been no need to create the sort of categories that I do here (anti-abortion, abortion-rights pre-*Roe* or abortion-rights post-*Roe*). So, while this system of categorization is largely my own, I cannot take full credit. The reason for this is simple: the categories already existed. Let me explain: activists were already putting these narratives into one category or another (narratives on illegal abortion go in one place while anti-abortion activists post their stories elsewhere). I can, however, take credit for recognizing and naming a system of categories that had never previously been acknowledged, though it was already in practice.

differences in the narratives center around the legality of abortion. Or by comparing both the anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives on legal abortion, one would assume that the variations are based in differing ideological perspectives. Both of these things are partially true—but by adding in the third set of narratives, a much more dynamic and complicated view emerges. By comparing anti-abortion narratives with narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, many connections become evident, suggesting that the content of narratives is a reflection of more than just the abortion experience itself.

Because I can only look closely at a few themes that emerge across the narratives, this larger list of broader themes suggests that there are many deep connections between narratives that tend to be considered inherently different. The remainder of this chapter moves away from simply listing many of the broader similarities and differences between and across narratives and begins to analyze four themes that emerge across all three sets of narratives just described. These themes include: pain associated with the procedure, characterizations of clinic staff and abortionists, centralization of the abortion to the remainder of their lives, and available alternatives to abortion.

Close Reading of Emergent Themes

Characterizations of Clinic Staff and Abortionists

The qualities and characteristics associated with clinic staff and abortionists is a theme found in all three of sets of narratives identified above. In general, the contemporary online abortion-rights narratives describe clinic workers and abortion doctors as warm, helpful and caring. Amy states, “A really nice nurse—who must have

gone through the procedure herself, because she could anticipate every cramp and pull and twinge—talked me through the procedure.”²³ Bridget remembers, “The physician’s assistant was wonderful about holding my hand and putting cold compresses on my forehead.”²⁴ Catherine describes the clinic staff as “great, comforting me and telling me dumb jokes to make me laugh and forget my cramps.”²⁵ Bette shares a similar account:

The receptionist was so kind, and everyone I saw gave me a genuine smile. Each procedure—from counseling to blood work to the actual abortion—was done with a gentle, respectful, and accepting attitude. I was calm and at peace with my decision; even the doctor who performed the abortion asked about my daughter’s picture, commented about the weather, and asked how my holiday shopping was coming. I was in good hands...²⁶

In these post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives the clinic staff members are described as going above and beyond the call of duty—they are telling jokes, offering cold compresses, easing nerves, and asking about holiday shopping. This positive characterization of clinic staff and abortion doctors evident in post-*Roe* online narratives is in direct contrast to the ways in which abortionists are described in pre-*Roe* narratives. Rarely are these abortionists described in positive terms. Caroline’s story reflects this point, as she remembers:

This so-called doctor—this man who called himself a doctor—had two businesses. He was a bookie and he was an abortionist. He was an elderly man in a ramshackle little house in a disreputable, shabby section of Youngstown. It in no way fit my image of a doctor’s house and office. I had never seen a doctor who lived like this man or looked like this man, or acted like this man. I don’t recall seeing any medical certificates on his

²³ I’m Not Sorry, “Amy’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/amy2.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

²⁴ I’m Not Sorry, “Bridget’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/bridget.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

²⁵ I’m Not Sorry, “Catherine’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/catherine.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

²⁶ I’m Not Sorry, “Bette’s Story” www.imnotsorry.net/bette.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

walls. I don't think anyone who was a doctor would also be a bookie. I think there was some actual gambling going on while we were waiting.²⁷

By calling the man that performed her abortion a “so-called doctor” and a “bookie,” Caroline challenges his credibility as a medical authority and makes a claim that other narratives on illegal abortion also support: those people willing to do abortions under the then-present conditions were shady and disgusting people, interested only in the money involved and unconcerned with the potential long-term medical side-effects of their actions. Caroline's story reflects another point common in narratives on illegal abortion: Even when women considered themselves “fortunate” enough to receive an abortion from a person they had been told was a doctor, they were often skeptical of this claim.

In cases where the woman seems to “know” that it was an actual doctor performing her illegal abortion, the conditions and the person are not described in much better terms than those that describe obtaining the procedure from any random abortionist. Consider Kathleen's story:

It was a filthy operation. It was a rural town, a residential house, and it looked like a flophouse where this M.D. kept an office just for this purpose. The office itself was filthy, he smelled of booze, and we had a very awkward time because of course I was fidgety and nervous, and sort of numb. When it was over, he tried to kiss me, which didn't seem so untoward. I mean, the whole thing was so tacky and tawdry and filthy that it didn't seem to me all that unusual that a person of his caliber would also try to do that.²⁸

²⁷ Messer, Ellen and Kathryn May. *Back Rooms: An Oral History of the Illegal Abortion Era*. (New York, Simon and Schuster: 1988), 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

In Kathleen's narrative, she does not question whether or not the abortionist also had a medical license; she seems sure of it. Yet, despite his position as a medical professional Kathleen's description mirrors the accounts of women discussing abortionists with no medical background.²⁹ The fact that women do not characterize the abortionist differently based on his or her credentials is important because it suggests that the women sharing their stories of experiences with illegal abortions blame the negativity of their situation on the illegality of the procedure rather than on the medical background or credentials of the abortionist. In this sense, the negative characterizations of abortionists serve as a reason to keep abortion legal.

Just as the above descriptions of the abortionists and doctors performing illegal abortions often include words such as "filthy" and "scary," characterizations of the physical space in which the illegal abortion was performed use remarkably similar language. In other words, descriptions of the person performing the abortion are closely tied to the conditions of the physical space in which the abortion was performed. Caroline's and Kathleen's above stories highlight this point. Sandra's story serves as another example: "[My friend] went with me to the abortionist. She called him a doctor but I'm pretty sure he wasn't a real doctor. He didn't even wash his hands! He was filthy. I mean, he even looked dirty. He stunk of booze. His hands shook."³⁰ One paragraph later, Sandra describes the scene of the abortion. "The abortionist's place looked like

²⁹ For a more positive characterization of abortionists in the illegal abortion era, see Laura Kaplan's *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service*.

³⁰ Miller, Patricia C. *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops, and Children of Women Who Died Talk About Its Horrors*. (New York, Harper Collins:1993), 62.

something out of a bad movie. As horrible as you can imagine, it was worse! It was a hovel—dirty, like he was.”³¹

Other women, though considerably fewer, speak more directly about the explicit abuse they received at the hands of the person performing their abortion. Janet remembers her experience with a doctor in 1957:

He did something that I thought was very strange and that I have always been convinced was for his benefit, not mine. He had me take off my clothes from the waist down and lie on this table in his office. There was no nurse or anyone else present. He began to do this weird ‘manipulation,’ as he called it. He put his hand in my vagina and kept touching my clitoris....I just lay there waiting for it to be over. Does it surprise you to learn that the ‘manipulation’ did absolutely nothing to dislodge the fetus? Well, it didn’t. When it was over, he told me to get dressed and go down to the drugstore to get the prescription filled. That was it. That was all the help I got from him: a piece of paper and a ‘manipulation’ for which I paid money.³²

Unfortunately Janet’s story does not end here; the pills prescribed did not work, the doctor refused to see her again, and after attempting various unsuccessful home remedies, she struggled to find another doctor who would perform the abortion. Janet’s story highlights the ways in which even medical doctors tend to emerge as negative figures, capable of deceit and abuse, within narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions.

This characterization of clinic staff as abusive, disrespectful and deceitful also emerges in anti-abortion narratives. In fact, the “Abortion Concern” website includes a section of narratives titled “Abused or Assaulted by clinic staff.” Rebecca shares her story, “I had the abortion, and woke up laughing hysterically, as, yes, I was hysterical.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 205.

The nurse slapped my face.”³³ While some women discuss physical abuse, more of them frame their experiences with the cold and distant clinic staff as emotionally abusive.

Bryanna states, “My mom went in the room with me. I got an I.V., and the next thing I knew, I was waking up, crying hysterically. The doctor yelled at me because I was scaring the patients.”³⁴ Amy’s description of her encounter with clinic staff is the most horrific:

I laid down on the bed as the doctor walked in and introduced himself. I began to shake uncontrollably as he placed my legs into the stirrups. As soon as he began to inject my cervix with the local I began to cry out ‘My baby, my baby’ over and over. Again the nurse told me to relax...I started screaming at the top of my lungs and kicking my legs. The doctor grabbed ahold of my legs and the nurse put her hand over my mouth and pressed my head sideways into the bed. She repeated to me again and again, ‘Stop screaming or you’ll scare off the other girls.’³⁵

Amy clearly does not view the people performing her legal abortion as respectable or noble professionals. In fact, Amy, as well as the other women posting their experiences to Abortion Concern, articulates a description that closely mirrors the ways that women describe illegal abortionists as taking advantage of women, cold, unfriendly and abusive. As shown throughout this analysis, this description varies greatly from the ways that women describe clinic staff within abortion-rights narratives on legal abortion.

The negative descriptions of illegal abortionists present in narratives reflect dominant ideas about the back-alley butcher and are closely tied to the images of the women who died from botched abortions. These images of the crooked abortionists,

³³ Abortion Concern, “Rebecca,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story058.php> (accessed 3/4/08).

³⁴ Abortion Concern, “Bryanna,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story039.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

³⁵ Abortion Concern, “Amy,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story030.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

back-alley locations and dead women emerge in both of the collections of narratives on illegal abortion (which each offer the stories of women who died from illegal abortions, or in the very least, mention that women did die from abortion when it was an illegal procedure) and, though less often, are also evident in post-*Roe* narratives on legal abortion—as well as in many other contemporary representations of abortion.

By describing illegal abortionists in overwhelmingly negative terms and invoking images of the back-alley and the dead woman, advocates of abortion rights have created and propagated a less than accurate version of history. As Rickie Solinger points out, women did die from abortions when the procedure was illegal, but this was almost always due to self-induced abortions, rather than the errors of abortionists. In fact, historical evidence “show[s] astonishingly high rates of technical proficiency and surprisingly low rates of septic abortion caused by [abortionists].” Solinger continues to explain the impacts of this falsehood, “The enduring myth of the back-alley butcher has profound contemporary relevance. The anecdotal, unsubstantiated taint attached to old-time practitioners has a way of bleeding across time to infect the public and professional standing of contemporary practitioners, who, with the myth intact, are ‘justifiably’ targeted by violent ‘pro-lifers,’ marginalized by the medical profession, and shunned by their own communities.”³⁶

With Solinger’s assertions in mind, it becomes clear that the images of women dying at the hands of crooked abortionists prior to *Roe v. Wade* evident in narratives on

³⁶ Solinger, Rickie. “Introduction: Abortion Politics and History,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 4.

For a more detailed discussion of abortion providers from 1918-1968, see Solinger’s *The Abortionist: A Woman Against the Law*.

the illegal abortion era is more a reflection of dominant discourses used by advocates for abortion rights than of historical events—and Solinger’s discussion of the history of practitioners performing illegal abortions serves as an important reminder: this thesis seeks to analyze abortion narratives as political rhetoric, and does not attempt to make historical claims about abortion based on the content of these narratives. In other words, I do not read these narratives as a reflection of “truth” or an accurate version of history, but rather I am attempting to learn what the content and deployment of these narratives tells us about discursive systems and political dynamics.

Solinger’s discussion of the illegal (but highly skilled) abortionist serves as an example of a disconnect between the historical texts on abortion and the content of the narratives I analyze, suggesting that historical context and personal experience are not the only things shaping these narratives, which opens up a space to analyze the political nature of abortion narratives. I believe that women remember and frame their experiences within the discourses available to them that support their political positions—and at times, the available discourses and one’s own set of politics may not allow for a story that accurately reflects history. However, it would be highly problematic to reproduce these historical inaccuracies within this thesis; while I make few claims regarding the historical accuracy of the narratives, I will provide historical evidence from secondary sources when I know that a consistently emergent theme is historically incorrect. In many ways, however, the consistency of myths present in the narratives highlights the fact that these

narratives are being shaped by things other than individual experience—including, but not limited to, discourses available and political beliefs.³⁷

So the question becomes: If women were not dying at the hands of illegal abortionists, why do narratives on illegal abortion (and even, to a lesser extent, those on legal abortion) consistently reference the scary back alleys? Though there may be many potential explanations for this, one obvious answer is that by framing illegal abortion as inherently dark, abusive, coercive and deadly—and legal abortion as a walk in the park—abortion-rights activists create a case for keeping abortion legal. A second potential explanation lies in the fact that all three sets of abortion narratives tend to represent their experience as wholly bad or entirely good (though the pre-*Roe* narratives frame the actual experience as terrible, not a single woman states that she regrets the decision to abort). Within this framework, the way one feels about abortion is conveyed through their descriptions of the procedure—in this case, through the characterizations of the abortion provider as well as the physical space in which the procedure was performed.

Certainly, a huge discursive shift occurs in the ways that those performing abortions are described from pre-*Roe* to post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives; abortionists performing illegal abortions are overwhelmingly described in negative terms while clinic staff performing legal abortions are nearly always described in positive terms. Yet, the narratives posted on Abortion Concern disrupt this dichotomy, forcing us to ask: What does this connection between anti-abortion contemporary online narratives and abortion-

³⁷ In regards to the collections of narratives on illegal abortion, it is important to remember that these stories were collected and edited by individuals with political motivations. So the larger narrative that emerges (illegal abortion is bad) may be produced as much through the editorial process as through the politics and memories of the individual women sharing their stories—further highlighting the political nature not only of the individual narratives, but also of the collections of stories.

rights narratives on illegal abortion suggest? Women sharing their experiences with pre-*Roe* illegal abortions invoke negative images of the back-alley butcher in order to argue for the necessity of LEGAL abortion. But for women whose stories are used as part of an anti-abortion platform, the issue clearly is not legality—it is abortion itself. In working to characterize abortion as detrimental to women, anti-abortion advocates characterize the medical professionals who perform the procedures by using strategies similar to the ways in which abortion-rights advocates characterize abortionists who performed illegal abortions. Upon reflection, perhaps this is not surprising: Women in both groups claim to have had a negative experience with abortion and believe they are working to create a better world where women will not experience similar problems. The narrators simply differ in what they attribute the negativity of their abortion to—the illegality of abortion or the abortion itself. Of course, this decision—framing the problem as either illegal abortion or abortion in general—is a political move in and of itself. It seems obvious that everyone who has had a legal abortion did not find the experience wholly positive; likewise, all women that experienced either an illegal abortion or who obtained a legal abortion and now oppose the legality of abortion were not at the mercy of unqualified or ferocious abortionists. Yet it is clear that the women sharing their abortion stories feel as if they must represent their experience within this binary, possibly because the only stories posted online or appearing in print collections of narratives follow the formula implicitly laid out in each set of narratives. It appears, then, that within this strict pro-choice vs. pro-life dichotomy, both sides view any narrative that does not reiterate their

ideologies and messages as threatening, highlighting the point that the content and emergence of abortion narratives is politically informed.

Physical Pain Associated with the Procedure

Pain is another theme that emerges in all three sets of abortion narratives, and is almost always characterized in one of two ways: excruciating or nearly non-existent. Overall, the post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives frame the pain as minimal, while the pre-*Roe* and anti-abortion narratives discuss the pain as overwhelming.

Like most narratives that are a part of an abortion-rights agenda, Brandy describes her experience with legal abortion, stating, “It was a very free and happy kind of feeling. I personally felt great. I was in very little pain and I wasn’t bleeding very badly.”³⁸ Anne’s description is similar, “The discomfort was so minor that I didn’t even bother taking the codeine my then-boyfriend had swiped from his mom’s bathroom for me.”³⁹ Bette states, “The procedure itself was not painful—uncomfortable but not painful. I was able to work that afternoon with almost no discomfort or cramping, and my morning sickness disappeared almost immediately. The antibiotics did not cause any side effects (except a nasty yeast infection) and I immediately felt better physically and emotionally.”⁴⁰ As these excerpts show, within narratives on legal abortion that are being used as part of a broader abortion-rights agenda, there is a tendency to describe the legal procedure as slightly uncomfortable or awkward, rather than excruciating or painful. If

³⁸ I’m Not Sorry, “Brandy’s Story” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/brandy.htm> (accessed 11/ 12/ 2007).

³⁹ I’m Not Sorry, “Anne’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/anne.htm> (accessed 11/ 12/ 2007).

⁴⁰ I’m Not Sorry, “Bette’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/bette.htm> (accessed 11/ 12/ 2007).

severe pain is mentioned, it is almost always qualified in a way that serves to reduce its seriousness. For example, Kelly shares her experience with legal abortion, stating, “The actual abortion hurt a lot, but only lasted a few minutes.”⁴¹

This is in direct contrast to the ways in which pain is discussed in both the anti-abortion narratives and also the pre-*Roe* narratives, where it is framed as much more severe and excruciating. Consider Michelle’s description, posted at Abortion Concern: “I felt a sharp pain, and then the sound of the machine turning on. It was the most painful thing I have ever felt. I immediately began to vomit....”⁴² Tabitha story is similar, “It started out in a manner that seemed as if I could handle it. Soon the overwhelming pain was almost unbearable. Clutching the sheets I felt the tears swell in my eyes. ..The pain was shooting through me by now, and I felt as if I was about to pass out, there was blood everywhere on the floor and what looked like pieces of flesh.”⁴³ This discussion of overwhelming pain evident in post-*Roe* anti-abortion narratives is clearly quite different from the ways that women describe their positive post-*Roe* abortions.

Part of this distinction may be accounted for by considering the ways in which one’s experience of physical pain is deeply connected to emotional pain, or lack thereof. When Bette remembers that after her abortion she “immediately felt better physically and emotionally,” she explicitly links physical and emotional well-being. On the other hand, Tabitha remembers the shooting pain, the blood and the flesh on the floor. Toward the end of her narrative, she states, “My life as it was ended that day. I made a mistake that

⁴¹ I’m Not Sorry, “Kelly’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/kelly.htm> (accessed 11/ 12/ 2007).

⁴² Abortion Concern. “Michelle,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story029> (accessed on 3/4/08).

⁴³ Abortion Concern “Tabitha,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story022.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

cost me the ability to have children ever again. Depression still haunts me, crying when I am around a baby, the hurt never goes away.” It does not seem coincidental that the vast majority of anti-abortion narratives discuss the physical pain of the procedure and their continuing emotional pain, while abortion-rights narratives minimize the pain of the procedure and argue that they have never experienced guilt or emotional distress over their decision.

While the issue of pain comes up consistently in post-*Roe* abortion-rights and anti-abortion online narratives, it comes up less within pre-*Roe* narratives. However, when pain is mentioned in these narratives, it is also described as overwhelming and severe. Margot remembers her experience with illegal abortion, “It hurt me so much—it was that sickening kind of pain that comes when you have cramps. I really couldn’t lie still—but I had to lie still...”⁴⁴ Caroline gives a similar account of her illegal abortion conducted by saline injection, stating, “It was more terrible than I ever imagined, partly because I was alone, partly because I was scared. I was timing the contractions and I just didn’t think I could bear anymore. I didn’t feel I could cry out for help, and I just remember thinking, ‘I’m going to get through this. I know that it went on for at least twelve hours.’” As Caroline’s story shows, when pre-*Roe* narratives mention pain, it is almost always connected to terror and fear associated with the entire procedure. And it is this terror and fear that the women tend to discuss in greater depth and detail than the physical pain experienced. Caroline continues to share her story:

⁴⁴ Messer, Ellen and Kathryn May. *Back Rooms: An Oral History of the Illegal Abortion Era*. (New York, Simon and Schuster: 1988), 48.

I remember noticing that the contractions were getting more frequent and more frequent, five minutes, then four minutes, then three minutes, and then there was a lot of blood and there was a fetus. I was really beside myself, and terrified. I didn't know what to do. There was more blood than I ever imagined. I used one of these metal waste baskets we had in the dorm rooms and I remember it being filled up. I think I had gone through the whole night and now it was midmorning, and there weren't many people around. I managed to get to the bathroom, very surreptitiously. I was terrified of someone discovering me, of being arrested. I remember taking this fetus and not knowing what else to do but flush it down the toilet. And I was terrified that it wasn't going to go down, and that it would clog up the system, that somehow, some way I would be found out. The whole system would be clogged up. They'd have to call a plumber and then there would be this hunt to find out who did this terrible thing in the dorm, and I'd be tracked down and prosecuted. I was really in shock and just terrified.⁴⁵

Caroline does not go on to mention pain again in her narrative. However, she does continue to discuss physical health problems that pain presumably accompanied. For example, Caroline states how she continued to hemorrhage for the next several days after expelling the fetus. Again, she mentions no pain accompanying the hemorrhaging, but does mention terror associated with these continued physical problems. "I really didn't think of going to a doctor; I didn't think of going to a hospital. I was afraid that I was going to be arrested and prosecuted. And I just kept hoping it would stop."⁴⁶ While Caroline remembers the pain associated with her procedure, she does not discuss it at length, instead focusing on her emotions and fears that accompanied the physical pain.

To some extent, Caroline's story sums up the differences between the ways that the issue of physical pain emerges within these narratives: contemporary narratives that support abortion rights disregard physical pain while narratives on illegal abortion and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

anti-abortion narratives tend to frame pain as excruciating; furthermore, when physical pain is mentioned in narratives on illegal abortion, it is more explicitly tied to additional factors, such as fear of death, long-term physical health problems, and fear of being caught and sent jail. Of course it is unlikely that all women who experienced a certain type of abortion actually felt one type of physical pain while women that obtained an abortion under different conditions all experienced pain in a drastically different way.

But again, I am less interested in whether or not the women *actually* experienced pain and more interested in the representation of that pain: Why do anti-abortion narratives emphasize the physical pain associated with the procedure while abortion-rights narratives minimize pain? It seems that this distinction can be accounted for, again, by thinking about the narratives as a political tool; the narratives that support abortion rights discuss pain in a way that would validate its legality. Within the abortion-rights narratives on legal abortion, less pain signifies a more valid medical procedure and also represents progress; within narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, pain signifies a more primitive time and is used in a way that showcases problems associated with the illegality of abortion in general. On the other hand, the anti-abortion narratives utilize the issue of pain to highlight the ways in which abortion physically and emotionally harms women, pointing to the ways in which the perception and construction of physical discomfort is intensely impacted by emotional pain. If abortion hurts women physically and emotionally, then the benefits of its legality are questionable. It seems clear, then, that regardless of one's position on abortion, the issue of physical pain emerges within

narratives to make a political claim about the benefits and losses associated with the procedure.

Alternative Options

All three sets of narratives discuss options other than abortion in order to deal with this unintended or unwelcome pregnancy. In the pre-*Roe* narratives, this alternative almost always emerges in the form of either getting married or going away to an un-wed mothers' home and subsequently giving the child up for adoption. Caroline remembers going through her options for dealing with her unwanted pregnancy:

I really did not know what to do. I spent a lot of time just seeing my life in a shambles. I thought about going to a home for unwed mothers and I thought about how my family would deal with it, how it would affect my college career, my scholarships, my job. How could I go away and then come back and pick up the pieces...I don't know when I really started thinking about an abortion. First, I thought about marriage and rejected it as an option. Then I envisioned the whole business of going away to a home. I couldn't even imagine telling my parents. I had lots of younger siblings at home and I couldn't imagine being at home pregnant. It was just unthinkable. At any rate, once I decided that I just really couldn't put my family through the shame, didn't want to put myself through whatever happens in those Booth homes for unmarried ladies, and totally rejected marriage, I started thinking that I would try and find a way of having an abortion.⁴⁷

Because most un-wed mothers' homes did not accept pregnant women until the seventh month, most young single women seeking these homes out would have to hide their growing bellies until late in the pregnancy when they could claim they were leaving for

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

an extended trip to a relative's home.⁴⁸ In most of these cases, the families of the pregnant women were almost always a part of orchestrating the story and making the move take place. If it wasn't an option to tell one's family about the pregnancy, then essentially going to an un-wed mothers' home was also not an option. Caroline's story reflects this point.⁴⁹

Margot tells a slightly different story about ending up in an un-wed mothers' home. Her narrative begins, "First of all, I had three abortions, but the first one was the most hard-hitting."⁵⁰ The remainder of her narrative discusses her first abortion in detail. One year after this illegal abortion, Margot was single, living alone in New York City and working as a nurse—when she found herself pregnant again. Her former fiancée had organized her abortion the year before, but Margot "didn't really know how to find an abortionist." She states, "I couldn't see myself going into pharmacies and doing that code trip that Tom had done."⁵¹ The one friend—a fellow nurse—that Margot did ask for help in locating an abortionist was unable to provide assistance. Instead she stated, "Look—it's no big deal. You just go along and wear a girdle, a really tight girdle, and loose sweaters and things, until you can't cover it up anymore, and then you just go off to a

⁴⁸ Fessler, Ann. *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade* (New York, Penguin Press: 2006), 134.

⁴⁹ One issue that does not come up in Caroline's narrative or any other narratives from the illegal abortion era is the cost of attending one of these homes. According to Rickie Solinger, a woman generally stayed at an un-wed mothers' home for six weeks and in this time would wrack up an average bill of \$200, which is equivalent to \$1200 today. For the families that could not pay this exorbitant cost or for the women that could not wait until the seventh month of their pregnancy to leave their community, a "wage home"—where the pregnant women would clean, cook and provide childcare for a wealthy family in exchange for room, board and spending money—was often used as a transition. For further discussion of un-wed mothers' homes and single pregnancy before 1973, see Fessler's *The Girls Who Went Away* or Solinger's *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*.

⁵⁰ Messer, Ellen and Kathryn May. *Back Rooms: An Oral History of the Illegal Abortion Era*. (New York, Simon and Schuster: 1988), 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

home....It's not particularly nice, but it's not terrible either. You just stay there for three months."⁵² As stated, Margot lived alone and far enough away from her family to hide the pregnancy, making an un-wed mothers' home a serious option to consider. However, this is extremely rare, as most of the women sent to these homes claim that the trip was organized by their families, either without asking their daughter how she wanted to deal with the pregnancy, or entirely against her will.

Both Margot's and Caroline's narratives shared above bring up another interesting point: although the issue of an un-wed mothers' home emerges frequently in the pre-*Roe* narratives on illegal abortion, and going away to a home subsequently entailed giving a child up for adoption, adoption is rarely named or mentioned in explicit terms. Going back to Caroline's story, it is clear that she is concerned with both telling her family of the pregnancy and the subsequent shame this pregnancy would bring onto her family. However, in her discussion of considering an un-wed mothers' home, she never once mentions adoption, a baby, or the emotional impacts of giving a child up for adoption. Margot's narrative confirms this point as well.⁵³

In the cases where alternative options to abortion are mentioned in post-*Roe* narratives, the only ones that seem worthy of the authors' consideration are marriage or single parenthood, though in most cases these options are portrayed as easily dismissible. Annabel shares the story of her second abortion, "I was dating a guy for some time when I found out I was pregnant. He wanted us to keep the child, so that is what we

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Although un-wed mothers' homes still exist today, I have not found a single post-*Roe* abortion-rights narrative that mentions going to an un-wed mothers' home as an option for dealing with an unwanted pregnancy.

planned. A few months later he was gone, so I decided to have an abortion. I didn't want to raise a baby on my own, especially when I wasn't sure if I wanted it in the first place."⁵⁴ Casey discusses how she came to seek an abortion and subsequently identify as "pro-choice," "When I got pregnant a second time I knew there was no way I could handle two kids and with some education, experience, and self-discovery, I didn't hesitate to explore my options. My decision was only hard in the sense that my fiancé really wanted another baby, [but] we were actually on the rocks at this period of time."⁵⁵ The stories shared by Annabel and Casey show that even when the narratives' authors believe that single parenthood is a socially-acceptable, potential alternative to abortion, it is more often portrayed as an alternative unavailable to them.

Just as pre-*Roe* narratives rarely mention adoption, post-*Roe* narratives on legal abortion also do not centralize adoption as an option for dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. When the issue of adoption does enter into a narrative it is framed as if this is either simply not an option at all, would be too emotionally painful, or is something that only irresponsible women would consider. Consider Justine's position:

I am also vain and arrogant enough that I didn't want MY child to be raised by other people, and I believe that's the prerogative of a caring mother. There are so many truly terrible parents out there, and so many other good people whose circumstances do not allow them to parent well, thanks (I believe) to our government's inhumane policies. The possibility of my flesh and blood living a miserable existence was a to me worse outcome than the idea of such a life being extinguished before it really began.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ I'm Not Sorry, "Angela's Story," www.imnotsorry.net/angela2.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁵⁵ I'm Not Sorry, "Casey's Story," www.imnotsorry.net/casey.htm. (accessed on 11/12/07)..

⁵⁶ I'm Not Sorry, "Justine's Story," www.imnotsorry.net/justine.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

In this narrative, Justine makes it clear that she understands that adoption would be a potential option for dealing with an unintended pregnancy, but one that is definitely not the right choice for her to make. In fact, she even goes further to suggest that a “caring mother” has the privilege of deciding whether to abort her fetus or give up a child for adoption. Aside from this discussion of adoption, no other alternatives for dealing with the unwanted pregnancy are mentioned—Justine does not entertain the idea of having a baby with her boyfriend, nor does she mention marriage or single motherhood.

Ann’s story is similar, though she frames her decision to abort within a parent/non-parent binary.

I have often heard women say they would never have an abortion, but its not until the reality hits you square in the face when you find out you are pregnant at the worst time; a time when you absolutely don’t want to be pregnant nor do you feel you can devote the emotional and physical energy it takes to be pregnant, give birth, and raise a child to become an independent and responsible adult.⁵⁷

Within Ann’s narrative, it is clear that she does not even consider adoption as an option. This point is reflective of most post-*Roe* contemporary narratives that are part of an abortion-rights platform. Perhaps most interestingly, the word adoption never appears in either Justine’s or Ann’s story.

On the rare occasion when adoption is explicitly mentioned and named within post-*Roe* abortion-rights narratives, it is done with a scathing, almost jeering tone, as if the writer is responding to the often-used suggestion of anti-abortion advocates: women should place an unwanted child up for adoption rather than having an abortion.

Catherine’s story reflects this point, as she strongly states, “My feeling about pro-lifers

⁵⁷ I’m Not Sorry, “Ann’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/ann.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

has always been ‘are YOU going to protect the unwanted ones? If I have this baby that I don’t want, are YOU going to adopt it?’”⁵⁸ Clearly, Catherine does not see adoption as a positive alternative to abortion.

While the limited discussion of adoption evident in abortion-rights narratives makes sense, I was surprised to find that adoption is rarely mentioned or alluded to within the anti-abortion narratives as well. In post-*Roe* anti-abortion narratives, the sole alternative to abortion appears as single parenting. In other words, no one expresses regret over the abortion or not giving a child up for adoption; the regret is that the child isn’t in HER life. Though single parenthood is not explicitly named, the narratives commonly articulate that they miss their baby and would do anything to have it back. Considering that the majority of the women posting to this site also discuss a lack of family support and an abusive partner, it is implied that many of these women see single parenthood as a better option than abortion. Consider Carrie’s story, “Like most women who choose to do this, I felt stuck, I felt alone, and I felt like I couldn’t give my child a good enough life. I was wrong and I am filled with sorrow and remorse each day.”⁵⁹

Although adoption is rarely mentioned explicitly in any of the three sets of narratives, it seems that there are differing ideologies that influence the ways in which this lack of naming and discussing emerges. Kristin Luker and Faye Ginsburg talk at length about the differing worldviews of “pro-choice” and “pro-life” activists. Though most of the women sharing their abortion stories do not connect their experiences to previous or subsequent activism, it seems likely that their positions on abortion are also

⁵⁸ I’m Not Sorry, “Catherine’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/catherineA.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁵⁹ Abortion Concern “Carrie,” <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story018.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

impacted by their worldviews—much like the activists that Luker and Ginsburg discuss. In *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristin Luker argues that abortion activists’ “beliefs about abortion are intimately connected to their attitudes toward children, sexuality, parenthood, the proper role of women, and the like.”⁶⁰ According to Luker, “pro-life” activists view men and women as intrinsically different, and thus believe that women and men have different roles to fill. “Most pro-life activists believe that motherhood—the raising of children and families—is the most fulfilling role that women can have.”⁶¹

According to this way of thinking, the women posting their narratives at Abortion Concern did not simply have an abortion—they gave up motherhood and woman’s most important role. In other words, the issue is not really about abortion or adoption; it is much bigger, touching on their own feelings of worth as women, their roles in our society and their ideas about motherhood. Considering this, the lack of discussion about adoption in these anti-abortion narratives begins to actually make sense. As stated previously, the women sharing their sadness and guilt do not seem to regret the actual abortion, do not make claims for wishing they had chosen adoption, and instead mourn over the fact that the child is not a part of their own lives.

Luker argues that the worldviews of “pro-choice” activists “diametrically oppose” those of the “pro-life” activists.⁶² In addition to the differing perspectives on women’s roles, family, the organization of society and sex, Luker argues that the centers of the

⁶⁰ Luker, Kristin. *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1985), 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 175.

worldviews of advocates for and against abortion also differ; anti-abortion activists place their faith in a divine being while abortion-rights supporters center their positions around a “belief in the highest abilities of human beings.” As Luker points out, another way of framing this difference in ideologies is that abortion-rights supporters are more concerned with a “short-term pragmatic view of the present world” while anti-abortion advocates focus on “the long-term view of a transcendent world.”⁶³

Considering the ideology of abortion-rights supporters that privileges a belief in human intelligence and the material conditions surrounding of one’s life, the lack of discussion of adoption in narratives that support abortion rights also is fitting. If women are meant to have control over their reproduction and can assess their reproduction best based on their intelligence, abilities and understanding of their quotidian situations, then abortion simply represents one way to harness that control—and considering that there is no moral dilemma involved, one would not need to thoroughly think through alternative options, such as adoption.⁶⁴

While differing views on motherhood and women’s roles impacts the lack of discussion of adoption within these abortion narratives, it is also possible that there are additional reasons for this absence. For example, I find the absence of adoption as an option for dealing with an unwanted pregnancy especially curious in the pre-*Roe* narratives, as the issue of unwed mother’s homes emerges frequently. It is possible that

⁶³ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁴ In some ways, I feel like Luker’s assessment is too simplistic and dichotomous. However, because her discussion of the differing worldviews of “pro-choice” and “pro-life” activists does allow us to consider, for example, the differing ways that motherhood (and thus adoption) emerges in the narratives, it seems fitting to include Luker’s analysis. For a more complicated discussion of the ways in which abortion activists in Fargo, North Dakota view motherhood and nurturance, see Faye Ginsburg’s *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*.

this lack is connected to the ways in which silence surrounded out-of-wedlock pregnancies in the 1950's and 1960's; in other words, without being able to talk about pregnancy, it is impossible to discuss a baby. Furthermore, the fear of telling one's family of the pregnancy, being removed from one's school, and going to a place for other "problem" teens appear to cause more stress than the subsequent issue of going home without the baby.

Similarly, the lack of discussion within the anti-abortion narratives discussed here is also striking, as most anti-abortion sites run by organizations centralize adoption, naming and discussing it at length. I wonder if this silence around adoption in the anti-abortion narratives is itself a rhetorical strategy—one used to both mark Abortion Concern and other anti-abortion sites that claim to be feminist as different from the more dominant religious anti-abortion sites, and also to create a discourse that more moderate people may respond to.

Most importantly, by considering these varying reasons for the lack of discussion on adoption—even in cases where it would be expected, such as the narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions and the anti-abortion narratives—it becomes evident that the content of the narratives is multiply constructed; in the case of adoption, I have argued that a lack of discussion could be due to differing worldviews (on motherhood, women's roles, sex, the family and so on), silence surrounding pregnancy, and even as a present-day rhetorical strategy. Therefore, it seems plausible that the content of narratives is shaped due to both political ideologies (worldviews), available discourses (and suggested silences) and strategies of the organizations seeking out the narratives.

Aside from the issue of adoption, another interesting issue emerges in regards to the presentation of alternative options: in post-*Roe* narratives much less space is given to describe the decision to abort and the process of deciding to abort is not nearly as central to the overall narrative in the post-*Roe* stories as it is within the pre-*Roe* narratives. In fact, within post-*Roe* narratives women rarely tell of how they agonized over what to do. Bridget shares her response to hearing the unwelcome news of her pregnancy, “After a nanosecond of fantasy about having the baby, I declared my intent to terminate the pregnancy.”⁶⁵ Julia shares a similar story, “As it was, the thought of carrying forward the pregnancy was never a real possibility for me. As far as I was concerned, there was no baby in development. This unintended pregnancy was something that had happened to me, a bodily function, like catching a cold or having a toothache.”⁶⁶ In both of these scenarios, it is clear that the women knew almost immediately that they would terminate the pregnancy.

This may be because the terror and fear that surrounded illegal abortion are not necessarily applicable to the ways that contemporary abortions are obtained and performed; the sense of dread, terror and the belief that this procedure may be connected to the end of one’s life would presumably lead a woman to very thoroughly consider all other options.⁶⁷ On the other hand, this shift in pre-*Roe* to post-*Roe* abortion narratives

⁶⁵ I’m Not Sorry, “Bridget’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/bridget.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁶⁶ I’m Not Sorry, “Julia’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/julia.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁶⁷ As shown, Solinger argues that this description of the illegal abortion era is incorrect. However, the women sharing their narratives certainly frame their decision-making process, and when applicable, the actual abortion experience, within a description of the back-alleys as frightening, disgusting and traumatic. I believe this gap can be accounted for by considering these narratives to be political rhetoric. This should not suggest that the women remembering their stories are disingenuous or that the stories are embellished,

should not necessarily suggest that the women obtaining legal abortions since 1973 do not thoroughly consider all alternative options. However, by looking to these narratives, it is clear that women sharing their experiences with legal abortions are not framing their decision-making process as central to their overall narrative. This is not to suggest that many of the women sharing their contemporary abortion stories did not struggle greatly with their decision to terminate the pregnancy. In fact, the reason I find this shift interesting has little to do with whether or not the women *actually* struggled over their decision.

The question then becomes: What shifts occurred historically, socially and politically so that the personal struggle and decision-making process accompanying the actual abortion procedure has become less important to highlight within the individual abortion narratives? Has the issue of reproductive rights become so polarized that even the women sharing their personal stories are caught within the strict “pro-life”/ “pro-choice” binary? If this is so, and the stories are constrained to fit the themes previously outlined within one side of the dichotomy, how is the liberatory potential of narratives thwarted? The following chapter seeks to answer two of these broader questions: how has the use of narratives by reproductive rights organizations shifted from 1969—the year that Redstockings, a radical feminist group in New York City, held the first abortion “speak-out”—to the present? How are these shifts related to changes in the public discourse utilized by reproductive rights organizations during this same time period?

but rather that their stories are remembered in a way that furthers one’s own political ideologies and are told within the limits of the discourses available.

Centralization of Abortion Experience to the Remainder of Her Life

In each of the three sets of narratives, the women characterize the abortion experience as central to the way the rest of her life unfolded. Within abortion-rights narratives, the abortion is framed as the sole event that led to her current success and happiness. In anti-abortion narratives the abortion is blamed for her current, severe and long-lasting depression, health problems, and inability to move past the experience and forgive herself.

The relationship of the (negative) abortion experience to the current (negative) situation of the narrator is mentioned or discussed at length in nearly all of the narratives posted at Abortion Concern. Beverly's story serves as a quintessential example of the ways that abortion is framed as a defining experience within anti-abortion narratives. Six months after her abortion she attempted to commit suicide. Two years later she was "depressed and unfulfilled" and resorted to "experimenting with legal and illegal drugs and with the protection of an IUD, practicing 'free love.'" Nine years after her abortion, Beverly was engaged to be married, though she didn't feel able to commit to a date. After her fiancé died, she "quickly ventured into marriage" the following year. Three years into her marriage, she learned that she was unable to bear children, which caused severe disruption to her marriage. Two years later, and seventeen years after the abortion, Beverly and her husband divorced. Five years later, Beverly was considering marriage, but her infertility and his desire for children seemed incompatible. Of course, Beverly sees the abortion as directly involved in creating these later hardships in her life.

Now that I am more aware of this influence, I can clearly see myself as the person I was prior to the abortion and the one I became after. The hopeful,

optimistic, self assured, inquisitive, witty adolescent woman child disappeared with this event. Shortly after, a scared, insecure, frantic woman child searched in vain for a grounding influence. In time, I became much more serious, introspective, fearful, insecure, cynical and at times depressed and pessimistic. I internalized feelings of being a 'bad person' no matter how successful I became or what accomplishments I could claim.

For Beverly, her abortion was not only responsible for the way the remainder of her life unfolded, but actually led to the creation of a different personality. Though she later states that she has now found "peace through meaningful completion of [her] relationship with [her] unborn child" it took "three decades to reach this plateau."⁶⁸ While Beverly managed to come to terms with her decision, she still believes that the abortion had severe and long-lasting impacts on her life.

Like Beverly, many women sharing their negative abortion experiences use the procedure to mark two distinct periods in her life: pre-abortion and post-abortion. Gisela states, "I now look at my life as before and after the abortion. I will never be the same, my heart will always be broken, and I will never stop blaming myself for what I've done to my baby."⁶⁹ Pam shares a similar story. Nineteen years after her abortion, she describes the way in which her life has unfolded:

Since the abortion, in all of God's goodness and glory, He's completely forgiven me of this most horrible act. He's even blessed me with two beautiful and most healthy children...But...psychologically, emotionally and physically I am a wreck! I have so many health issues I don't know where to begin. I was never sick a day before the abortion, could go anywhere and do anything I wanted anytime I wanted to. But since the abortion I've gone from bad to worse. I have lower abdominal pain constantly, in which the doctor's have no cure for. I have panic attacks and

⁶⁸ Abortion Concern, "Beverly," <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story024.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

⁶⁹ Abortion Concern "Gisela," <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story059.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

can't travel. And worse than all of this is the fact that I have to live with the shame and guilt of that decision. Although I know that I'm truly forgiven by God, I cannot seem to forgive myself.⁷⁰

By claiming that she was never sick before her abortion and subsequently listing the various physical and emotional problems she has experienced since the procedure, Beverly clearly marks the abortion as the point in which her life made a negative turn.

Women sharing their positive experiences with abortion tend to centralize the experience in much the same way as the women sharing their anti-abortion stories. Of course, depression, suicide and hopelessness as a result of the abortion are not evident in these narratives that support abortion rights; instead these themes are replaced with discussions of fortune, success and happiness. Brandi states, "I know that had I chosen to have children, I would not be married now. I would not be back in college getting a degree. I would have missed a lot of great experiences. I won't say I feel joyful about having had to make the decision to have an abortion, but I will say that I do not regret it, I would do it again, and I'm glad I was able to have the choice in the first place."⁷¹

Brandi's story highlights the two issues that women seem to focus on in terms of the success their abortion allowed: marriage and education or business opportunities. Colleen states, "I'm now happily married to a wonderful man. I honestly don't think this would have been possible if I had a twelve-year-old child."⁷² Candace discusses the benefits to her abortion, "I am starting my own business now, too, which I do not believe

⁷⁰ Abortion Concern. "Pam," <http://www.abortionconcern.org/stories/story040.php> (accessed on 3/4/08).

⁷¹ I'm Not Sorry, "Brandi's Story," <http://www.imnotsorry.net/brandi.htm> (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁷² I'm Not Sorry, "Colleen's Story," <http://www.imnotsorry.net/colleen.htm> (accessed on 11/12/07).

I could do if I had a 5-year-old child.”⁷³ Alma shares the story of the abortion she had two years ago, “If I would have had the child, I never would have had the chance to finish college or to get as wonderful a job as I have now. I thank the fact that abortion is legal 100 times a day when I see my accomplishments.”⁷⁴ Anne remembers, “As I finally got myself together in my twenties—finished college, went on to graduate school, finished my doctorate and started a career as a professional—I sometimes thought of the baby I didn’t have. It was clear to me that I had made the right decision, that without the abortion I could never have gone on to have my happy and productive life.” After her second abortion at age forty, Ann states, “Not having this baby enabled me, once again, to move forward with a productive, useful, and joyful life. It was a gift.”⁷⁵

For Ann, and each of the women quoted here, the ability to remember her decision in a positive light seems directly connected to the fact that she is happy with her current life. In other words, the women sharing their stories on the I’m Not Sorry website are not saying, “I’m financially broke, never finished college, am divorced and am so happy that I had that abortion.” Likewise, women posting their experiences to Abortion Concern are not stating, “I was able to finish college and get a good job; considering my fulfilling and successful life path, I regret my decision to abort.”

While the women sharing their abortion-rights narratives tend to paint their overall lives as wonderful and the women sharing their anti-abortion narratives frame their lives in heart-wrenching terms, two distinctions must be made to complicate this

⁷³ I’m Not Sorry, “Candace’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/candace.htm> (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁷⁴ I’m Not Sorry, “Alma’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/alma.htm> (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁷⁵ I’m Not Sorry, “Anne’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/anne.htm> (accessed on 11/12/07).

general framework: anti-abortion narratives discuss the post-abortion negativity at much greater length than the abortion-rights narratives discuss the benefits to the abortion, as is evident in the narratives highlighted above. The second distinction exists within abortion-rights narratives: the narratives on illegal abortion do not centralize the abortion in the same ways that that post-*Roe* narratives do. In fact, framing the abortion as central to the remainder of her life is much less common within narratives on pre-*Roe* abortions; this is especially true within *Back Rooms* and *The Worst of Times*, the two published collections of narratives that seek to describe the illegal abortion era.

I believe this distinction can be accounted for based on the goals of each set of narratives: narratives on illegal abortion published in the late 1980's/early 1990's were responding to anti-abortion political gains; their primary goal was to remind Americans of the problems women faced when abortion was illegal. In other words, the goal was to create a negative image of illegal abortion, rather than a positive image of the role abortion (legal or illegal) can have in a woman's life. On the other hand, framing abortion as a positive, life-affirming decision is precisely the goal for Beninato and the women posting their stories on the I'm Not Sorry website. It seems clear that the framing of the abortion experience as entirely positive or wholly negative is central to the political projects of the women sharing their stories—and impacts they ways in which the narrators view and discuss the legality and morality of abortion.

Distinctions within One Group of Narratives: The Emergence of Activism in Narratives on Illegal Abortion

This discussion of themes present across and within three sets of abortion narratives should not suggest that each set of abortion stories can be reduced to a homogenous group. Despite the great similarities in themes that emerge across stories, distinctions do exist between narratives within each group as well as between groups of narratives. For example, among the narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions posted online at I'm Not Sorry, almost all of the women express that their experience with abortion led them to some form of related activism. This is not the case in the print collections of narratives on illegal abortion. In fact, the closing chapter of *Back Rooms* is titled "The Activists" and does not include one story by a woman who had actually experienced an illegal abortion; three of the four stories in this section come from men. It seems, then, that the editor of *Back Rooms* separates out "activism" from the personal experiences of women that had an illegal abortion, which is radically different from the ways in which women who had illegal abortions describe their experiences in their narratives posted online.

There are many plausible reasons for this distinction: because *Back Rooms* was both a response to the anti-abortion gains throughout the 1980's and sought to re-create the negative aspects of the illegal abortion era, it is possible that the editor of the collection wanted to portray the women who had had an illegal abortion as women in a desperate situation, rather than women empowered to become active agents in the political struggle for abortion rights; it is possible that the editor never asked the

questions to learn about the activist endeavors of the women she interviewed; or perhaps a website titled “I’m Not Sorry” tends to solicit stories from women who feel very strongly about the necessity of the right to legal abortion. In other words, I believe that this distinction is due to the space (personal interview versus self-reporting online) and time (1980’s or 2003-2008) in which the illegal abortion was remembered, the discourses available at that historical moment and in that space, and the shifts in the political landscape between these two time periods.

Similarly, while personal activism emerges in a couple of the narratives present in *The Worst of Times*, it is definitely not a theme one would notice from this work alone. Included in this printed collection are a few stories that contain components of activism, such as a lawyer that represented a doctor being charged with the murder of a young woman who had died from an illegal abortion, as well as a woman who had provided abortion referrals for a minimal fee. Julia’s story contains the most explicit connection to activism, as she remembers experiencing an unwanted pregnancy in 1965 and was unsuccessful in her attempts to find an abortionist. When she frantically asked her doctor how she would survive, he responded, “You will put another potato in the stew.” Julia states, “I’m a grandmother now, and I work as a counselor in an abortion clinic. Every morning, when I see that waiting room full of women, I remember the time when all we could have given them was an extra potato, and I’m glad to be at work.”⁷⁶ While Julia connects her experience with an illegal abortion to her current work, this is extremely rare in the two print collections analyzed here. I make this distinction not as a call for a

⁷⁶ Miller, Patricia C. *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops, and Children of Women Who Died Talk About Its Horrors*. (New York, Harper Collins:1993), 175.

more “authentic” activism, but to point out the differences in portrayals of activism within narratives that support abortion rights.

While Julia’s discussion of activism does not reflect a trend in the print collections on illegal abortions, connecting the abortion experience to later activism is common in the online narratives on illegal abortions. Consider Linda’s story: “Today I look back on that experience as the beginning of a life dedicated to a woman’s right to make safe and healthy choices for her future and her family. I serve on the Board of Directors at a Planned Parenthood, escort women past harassing protestors at a women’s clinic, and oversee a volunteer fund which provides financial help to women who cannot afford an abortion. I have never been “sorry,” I’ve been motivated!”⁷⁷ Laura states, “Today I donate money to my Catholic high school, but they know that whatever info I send in about my life is to be published in the Alumni News Bulletin. So it is usually something to the effect of ‘Laura...’72 is on the board of Planned Parenthood”, or Laura....’72 marched for abortion rights in Washington DC.”⁷⁸

Laurie’s description of activism is much different than the versions presented in either *The Worst of Times*, which hardly mentions activism, or *Back Rooms*, which presents the activism of people that do not connect their passion for abortion rights to a past personal experience. *Back Rooms* focuses on the very visible activism of four well-known activists: Pat Maginnis and Lawrence Lader (two of the founding members of the National Abortion Rights Action League⁷⁹) as well as Reverend Robert Hare (an activist

⁷⁷ I’m Not Sorry, “Linda’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/lindaA.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁷⁸ I’m Not Sorry, “Laura’s Story,” www.imnotsorry.net/laura.htm (accessed on 11/12/07).

⁷⁹ The National Abortion Rights Action League is now known as The National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League.

in the civil rights movement who founded the Cleveland Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies) and Bill Baird (the Baird in *Baird v. Eisenstadt*, the state of Massachusetts Supreme Court case that decided the ban on contraceptives for single people was unconstitutional as it constituted an infringement on privacy). Clearly, this type of activism on a national scale, which involved breaking laws the activists found unjust, is very different from making monthly contributions to Planned Parenthood or marching at an abortion-rights rally in D.C that hopes to create greater visibility for keeping abortion legal. Part of the difference may be simple: The stories in *Back Rooms* are about activism during the illegal abortion era, while the online narratives generally highlight the ways in which an experience with an illegal abortion within this period *led to* future connections with organizations dedicated to abortion rights.

This example of the differing ways in which activism emerges strictly within abortion-rights narratives on illegal abortion highlights an important point: though themes emerge within a particular type of narrative, as well as across narratives that are typically marked as different, significant differences also exist within narratives that I have collected into these three distinct groups. These evident differences complicate the notion of the collective narrative; the four academic essays that utilize the notion of the collective story in their analysis of themes in specific narratives neither account for the continuity of themes that emerge across various types of narratives, nor create the space to analyze the differences within a particular set of narratives.

Erin's Story: Defying Characterization

As shown thus far, most individual abortion narratives are compiled and published in collections, either online or in print, and are almost always connected to a broader political agenda. To this point, all of the abortion narratives analyzed come from collections of individual narratives that are part of an abortion-rights or anti-abortion agenda, which is a reflection of the current ways in which abortion narratives are being shared publicly. In the thousands of narratives published online and in print, I've only been able to find one lone online narrative that explicitly defies this characterization, which makes Erin's narrative worth addressing here. There are two reasons why I am utilizing Erin's narrative: this is the only narrative I've found that explicitly and convincingly argues against being a part of any broader political agenda and secondly, by refusing association with either the abortion-rights or anti-abortion position and simultaneously using the rhetoric of both camps, Erin's narrative serves to make my previous claims on the distinctions between narratives more clear. By pointing out the differences between Erin's narrative (in which she argues against taking a political position on abortion) and the others I have discussed thus far, the discursivity and constrained nature of abortion-rights and anti-abortion narratives becomes especially apparent.

Erin decided to post her abortion story online when she found herself simply unsatisfied with the other narratives she had read.

I am not trying to sway anyone in any direction or convince anyone that abortion is the right choice. Before my abortion, I scoured the Internet looking for personal accounts of abortions. I wanted to read more than sterile lists describing the procedure. I wanted to know, in the words of

other women, what it was like for them. I found a few stories like that, but most were very biased toward a very pro-life slant or did not give very much detail about their experience, only stating it was the best choice for them. I don't want my story to have a slant either way. This was the choice I made and although I know it was the best choice for me, I don't want to encourage other women to make the same choice. I simply want to tell it like it was and give my experience, because that is exactly what I needed when I was considering abortion.⁸⁰

Erin continues to tell a markedly different account of her abortion experience than I have found elsewhere. In a very anti-sensationalist and matter-of-fact way, she describes the research that went into the procedure, arriving to the clinic with her husband and 15 month old child (who did not go inside with her), her negative feelings toward the clinic protestors, the aesthetics of the waiting room, her thoughts about God abandoning her while in the clinic, the intense physical pain that accompanied the procedure, and finally vomiting into her husband's baseball cap during the car ride back to the hotel. Her narrative ends by acknowledging the apparent contradictions throughout her story, "I rested on the bed and felt relieved and sad at the same time."⁸¹

The overwhelming majority of abortion narratives do not allow for this level of personal tension and complexity. As has been shown throughout my analysis, either the woman represents herself as wholly depressed about the abortion or appears to have absolutely no qualms about her decision; either she experienced severe pain or almost no pain at all; either this was the decision that led to her future success or the downfall of her life. Erin is not only explicitly working against these dichotomies in her own narrative, but it was actually these splits that propelled her to share her experience. Erin felt

⁸⁰ AOL Hometown, "Introduction," <http://hometown.aol.com/herstory2005/intro.html> (accessed 11/12/07).

⁸¹ AOL Hometown, "My Abortion Story," <http://hometown.aol.com/herstory2005/abortion.html> (accessed 11/12/07).

dissatisfied with the other abortion narratives she had read and found herself unable to identify with their goals and content. She simply wanted factual information about what an abortion would entail, and was unable to locate detailed personal accounts that were not politically embellished. So, she created her own.

There are certainly aspects of Erin's story that would make both abortion-rights and anti-abortion advocates cringe. As discussed previously, it is abnormal for abortion-rights narratives to include descriptions of the pain as being "almost unbearable." Erin continues to describe the procedure, "I felt pulling and suction and poking and it was painful and I think I was sobbing, but I don't know if I was only crying inside. I was crying for my baby that they were sucking out of me. I cried because it hurt and I cried because they were killing my baby and I was letting them." Although Erin does not regret her decision to obtain an abortion, which is reflective of abortion-rights narratives, her description of the physical and emotional pain she endured during the procedure closely mirrors descriptions of pain present in anti-abortion narratives.

The most interesting aspect of Erin's narrative is that she appears to tell her story simply as she understands it—without connecting her experiences to any larger political movements or positions. This produces a narrative that is rife with contradictions. For example, Erin's description of her pain, her overt labeling of the fetus as her baby, or her discussion of the connection she felt to her baby could easily appear on any anti-abortion website. At the same time, Erin's story includes components that would make any abortion-rights activist confident or even smug in her position.

I knew right away that I did not want to keep the baby, and that shocked me inside. I had always been pro-choice, but it was more like, 'I think

abortion should be safe and legal, but I would never get one myself.’ So easy to say when you haven’t been in the situation. I thought of how we had had to move in with my parents and Will had lost his job. How we were making barely enough now just to pay bills. How we both hated living with my parents...and how we were trying so desperately to get through college and move out. I could not see living with my parents with two children.

It is clear that Erin views abortion as a legal right, albeit one that she thought she would never need to utilize. Immediately upon learning of her pregnancy, she takes into account her current economic situation, future goals, and impacts on her relationship and extended family as she makes a decision regarding the pregnancy. The notion that the outcome of her pregnancy is ultimately her decision to make is based in what Erin calls a “pro-choice” position. Yet, Erin goes on to describe her relationship with her husband and their belief in God:

Will really wanted to keep the baby, and take a second job, making him work seven days a week. We were both in school at the time, and I knew neither of us would be able to graduate with another child to care for. I finally told him that my mind was made up and I was terminating the pregnancy. He even tried to play the lottery, which he seldom does. He was convinced God would come through with something to help us keep the child. He didn’t.⁸²

The central positioning of God that is obvious in Erin’s narrative is much more commonly expressed in anti-abortion narratives rather than narratives that are a part of an abortion-rights platform. On the other hand, this brief vignette also highlights the fact that Erin believes that the final decision in regards to her pregnancy is hers to make, and this belief could generally be considered a feminist sentiment. Therefore, even from this brief description of Erin’s narrative, it should be clear that she is telling her story as she sees it,

⁸² AOL Hometown, “My Choice,” <http://hometown.aol.com/herstory2005/choice.html> (accessed 11/12/07).

with little consideration for how the story could be interpreted and utilized by either abortion-rights or anti-abortion advocates. In terms of abortion narratives, this makes Erin's story an anomaly.

Erin's rhetorical strategies and lack of connections to anti-abortion or abortion-rights organizations are especially interesting when juxtaposed with narratives that fall into these categories. While the lack of political agenda in Erin's narrative sets it apart from other narratives, its content reflects some of the themes that emerge in both anti-abortion and abortion-rights narratives. Through comparing Erin's story to other narratives, it is possible to further articulate similarities and differences in the ways themes emerge across narratives, and thus, Erin's story both challenges and furthers the idea of a collective narrative. If we can point to ways that her narrative differs from other narratives, this suggests that, to some extent, themes are evident within the group of narratives that Erin's story is being compared to. And these themes work together to covertly inform women what parts of their stories are acceptable to share. At the same time, through identifying similarities between Erin's story and both anti-abortion narratives and abortion-rights narratives, the differences between both sets of narratives become more apparent. In doing so, Erin's story works to highlight the political nature of the narrative form.

In some ways, Erin's narrative is less explicitly politically-situated than the other narratives discussed. While I have decided to share her narrative as an example of a narrative that does not fit into the dichotomies outlined previously, this should not suggest that I am advocating for abortion narratives to be told within an apolitical

framework. In fact, I do not believe that Erin expresses a more genuine representation of her abortion experience than the women who identify their positions as strongly in support of or opposition to legal abortion rights; I believe that her experience was also constructed by the historical moment in which she obtained and remembered her abortion as well as the discourses available to her—though Erin clearly felt she could borrow from more than one ideology and discourse in order to construct her story. The benefit to juxtaposing Erin’s narrative with other abortion-rights and anti-abortion narratives is that it simply allows us to see more clearly the formulaic nature of representations of abortion in narrative form. It also serves as a reminder, that despite the overwhelming consistency present in narrative representations of abortion, an alternative and expanded discourse of abortion is not only necessary, but is actually possible.

CHAPTER 2: SHIFTS IN THE APPLICATION OF ABORTION NARRATIVES, 1969-PRESENT

While the previous chapter consists of a close textual analysis of the themes emerging in three sets of abortion narratives, this chapter is dedicated to understanding how personal narratives have been utilized historically within organizations dedicated to the abortion issue, and how their deployment has shifted over time. Because the focus of this chapter is to understand how one particular rhetorical strategy—abortion narratives—has been utilized, it is imperative to understand how this strategy fits into broader shifts in the rhetorics of reproductive rights movements. Therefore, this chapter seeks to understand both the ways in which abortion narratives have been used historically as well as the way that this utilization of narratives intersects with dominant discourses.

In order to outline the ways in which dominant discourses have shifted, I offer a fairly detailed history of the discursive strategies utilized by mainstream reproductive rights organizations by pointing out the rhetorics used in various periods: the feminist and woman-centered rhetoric evident in the late 1960's-70's, the pro-privacy, pro-family, and anti-government discourse that dominated the 1980's, the language of innocence and victimization as well as a discourse of health evident in the 1990's and into the 2000's.⁸³

Secondly, I offer a timeline that highlights the dates that specific collections of narratives were produced, which functions to make apparent two gaps in the production

⁸³ Though historians, journalists and feminist scholars have articulated the idea that specific language tended to dominate the rhetorics of reproductive rights organizations at different historical moments (feminist language dominant in 1960's and 1970's; a health-infused discourse emerged in the 1990's), I have not seen this information offered in a succinct timeline, as I offer here. So, I would not claim that this argument is either mine or has been previously articulated in this manner, but that it is based on my reading of a breadth of material on the topic.

of narratives (1969-1985 and 1992-2001) as well as two influxes of narratives. The detailed historical account of dominant rhetorical strategies used at various times throughout the struggle for reproductive rights becomes especially important here, as I then use this history to hypothesize what could account for both the two gaps in the production of narratives as well as the two periods which produce several collections of narratives.

1960's and 1970's

Abortion narratives were utilized publicly as a rhetorical strategy to gain political rights for the first time in 1969. In response to being kicked out of a legislative hearing on abortion reform, in which fourteen men and one female nun comprised the panel of “experts” who would inform legislators of the need to mildly reform abortion laws, the Redstockings, a radical feminist activist group founded in New York City in 1967, hosted the first “speak-out” on abortion in New York City. Twelve women sat on a panel in front of three hundred audience members, and both panelists and audience members publicly shared their personal experiences with abortion. Susan Brownmiller, a Redstockings member, remembers their straight-forward strategy, stating “the political message of the emotion-charged evening was that women were the only true experts on unwanted pregnancy and abortion....”⁸⁴

In her Introduction to *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, Jennifer Nelson argues that Redstockings “made abortion and reproductive rights central

⁸⁴ Nelson, Jennifer. *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York City: NYU Press: 2003), 37.

to their feminist philosophy.”⁸⁵ This focus on the necessity of reproductive freedom emerged out of consciousness-raising groups, and through expanding the ideas raised and theories formed in these groups to others, “Redstockings brought second wave feminist attention to abortion.”⁸⁶ In fact, Redstockings members “were some of the first feminists to demonstrate that abortion concerned women’s bodies and, therefore, should be controlled by women, not male doctors, lawyers, judges, or legislators.”⁸⁷ Prior to the contributions of Redstockings in the late 1960’s, “no one had yet put women at the center of a movement for reproductive empowerment, even though abortion rights had been a political issue of some importance since the early part of the decade.”⁸⁸

Though there were certainly other organizations—those made of up male clergy, doctors and lawyers—working on the availability and legality of abortion throughout the 1960’s and early 1970’s, I offer the example of Redstockings because they were the first feminist group to use personal experience through public narrative to argue for the necessity of abortion rights. Furthermore, the language they use in their narratives highlights the deep connections between the feminist movement and the movement for abortion rights in the late 1960’s.

In an analysis of the Redstockings’ rhetorical strategies, Tasha Dubriwny argues that the Redstockings’ call for bodily self-determination was a reflection of “one of the main themes of radical feminist abortion rights discourse.”⁸⁹ Dubriwny quotes one of the

⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁹ Dubriwny, Tasha. “Consciousness-Raising as Collective Rhetoric: The Articulation of Experience in the Redstockings’ Abortion Speak-Out of 1969.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* Vol 91, No 4, (2005): 415.

panelists at the speak-out, "...since not only do we carry the child for nine months, but then usually for at least 12 or 15 years we do more than carry the child, we care for the child, the decision of our bodies is ours. And I would say that women have the ultimate control over their own bodies."⁹⁰ For the Redstockings, and other radical feminist groups, abortion rights were central to bodily self-determination in ways that went beyond claims of pregnancy and childbirth to discussing child-rearing and other forms of institutional sexism. Dubriwny states that the Redstockings believed that "Abortion laws are created to support a certain understanding of womanhood, one that depicts women as fragile creatures in need of protection, and to support the continued dominance by men over women." Dubriwny offers a quote by a panelist to further describe the link that the Redstockings saw between women's liberation and the necessity to repeal abortion laws, "...women are used as tools in a power structure. Look, abortion, people don't want to legalize abortion because then there would be a breakdown in the power structure. Women are tools. Women are possessions, we are owned, and the things we carry are also owned."⁹¹ Clearly, the Redstockings members saw abortion laws as part of broader institutional oppressions that kept women from realizing their full potential.

Redstockings, and other radical feminist organizations active in the late 1960's and 1970's, not only believed that abortion rights were fundamental to women's liberation, but also made women's stories and experiences central to their fight for abortion rights, and thus, their broader struggle for women's liberation. This is evident in the centralization of the consciousness-raising sessions used widely in feminist circles,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 416.

and subsequent actions such as Redstockings' abortion speak-out that evolved out of these consciousness raising groups.

By the time *Roe v. Wade* legalized some abortions at the federal level, anti-abortion activists had mobilized; in 1973, the National Right to Life Committee produced the first edition of their newsletter, arguing, "We must work for the passage of a constitutional Human Life Amendment."⁹² This backlash propelled abortion-rights activists to mobilize as well; in 1973 the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights emerged and the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, founded in 1969, became the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL). Despite efforts by abortion-rights activists and organizations, the Hyde Amendment was passed in 1976, prohibiting Medicaid to fund abortions for poor women.

1980's

While movements for women's rights and abortion rights were deeply connected in the late 1960's and 1970's, there was a definite shift during the 1980's—possibly prompted by the general backlash against both the feminist movement and movement for abortion rights. In 1980, the "Republican party platform call[ed] for appointment of anti-abortion-rights judges at every level of the federal judiciary."⁹³ In the same year, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Harris v. McRae* upheld the congressional ban on funding outlined in the Hyde Amendment. By 1981, Ronald Reagan, a conservative, anti-

⁹² Solinger, Rickie. Ed. *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), xiii.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

abortion Republican, took over as President. These three examples suggest that a conservative climate had emerged, and for the sake of maintaining abortion rights, reproductive rights organizations began to develop strategies that did not align them so closely with the feminist movement.

In *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, William Saletan outlines the ways in which organizations dedicated to abortion rights and the strategists they hired “re-package[d] abortion rights as a conservative idea.”⁹⁴ Though the crux of his analysis begins in 1986—a year in which Saletan argues the “nature of the American war over abortion began to change”—and focuses on the abortion issue’s “least personal and perhaps most consequential dimension: mass communication and political persuasion,”⁹⁵ Saletan’s history of the discourses of reproductive rights organizations also works to situate the ways in which NARAL and other abortion-rights organizations have (and have not) utilized personal narratives in various capacities since the Redstockings’ speakout. The use of personal narratives and women’s lives comes up at various points throughout Saletan’s analysis, though the focus of his argument lies elsewhere—namely in analyzing the effects of using alternative political strategies that do not centralize women’s lives.

Saletan shows that in early 1986, when Kate Michelman became NARAL’s new Executive Director, NARAL employees and abortion-rights activists were concerned with both sharing women’s stories and framing abortion rights within a broader feminist

⁹⁴ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 5.

⁹⁵ Saletan, William. “Electoral Politics and Abortion,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 111.

framework. For example, in 1985 NARAL responded to the 1983 anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream*⁹⁶ with a campaign titled “Silent No More,” which “urged women to tell the stories of their abortions, legal or illegal.”⁹⁷ Clearly, in 1985 women’s experiences and stories were still seen as a useful strategy in the fight for abortion rights. The “Silent No More” campaign “aimed to connect Americans personally with the difficulty of abortion decisions, the conscientiousness of the women who made them, and the horrors of illegal abortions. Sixty thousand women responded with letters to NARAL. Thousands told their stories in public forums. NARAL considered it a stirring success.”⁹⁸ It appears, then, that in the mid-1980’s, NARAL was still framing abortion rights within a broader feminist framework—one that considered women’s stories central to its message.

But, according to Saletan, things changed in 1986 due to two specific instances: 1.) The Supreme Court handed down a decision in *Thornburgh v. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists* that made it clear that *Roe* was hanging on by a single vote and 2.) Reagan nominated an anti-abortion Justice to the Supreme Court. Abortion rights activists quickly learned that, in the case of *Roe*’s reversal, they would need to be able to “defend the territory of abortion rights, not with the nuances of legal argument, but with the blunt weapons of electoral politics.”⁹⁹ In light of these anti-abortion political gains it is not surprising that Michelman had visions of moving NARAL’s “rhetoric and

⁹⁶ *The Silent Scream* is a 1984 anti-abortion film that shows in grotesque detail the abortion of a fetus at twelve weeks, as well as additional aborted fetuses in various stages of development. Nearly everyone working on either side of the abortion debate is familiar with this film, which is still used today. It can be seen on the website of Vote Yes For Life, which is the anti-abortion group that led the campaign to ban abortion in South Dakota. There is discussion as to whether the footage actually represents an abortion.

⁹⁷ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 37.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Saletan, William. “Electoral Politics and Abortion,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 111.

image into the political mainstream. By ‘mainstream’ she meant less emphasis on abortion and more on women’s equality, birth control, and sex education.”¹⁰⁰

In November of 1986, abortion-rights supporters and strategists won four unlikely state ballot measures in some of the most conservative states. Considering the climate for abortion rights—exemplified by NARAL’s recent defeat in asking Senators to oppose Rehnquist’s confirmation to the Supreme Court—NARAL was ecstatic with these wins, and brought together the strategists behind the campaigns to share their secrets with the national organization. Saletan describes the strategy used by Brownie Ledbetter, the woman behind the Arkansas campaign, in straight-forward terms:

Her team had steered the debate in Arkansas away from abortion toward the broader question of government intrusion. She stressed that the campaign’s leaders had shunned feminist rhetoric. Instead, they had relied on a game plan designed by professionals, based on polls and focus groups. They had worked in concert with public opinion, not against it. They had won with their heads, not their hearts.¹⁰¹

In other words, the state strategists rejected the anti-abortion ballot measures by adopting an anti-government message rather than a pro-woman message. Since the early 1980’s pro-choice political strategists had been exploring the possibilities of this shift, and in the 1986 elections, the strategy came to fruition. The polls and focus groups had showed that while, “voters did not share conventional pro-choice concerns about women’s rights and the welfare of teenagers and the poor, they were willing to reject the anti-abortion ballot measure on other grounds. They disliked big government. They treasured the sovereignty

¹⁰⁰ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 37.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

of families, as opposed to women or girls. And they saw abortion as a privilege reserved for rape victims, not as a right retained by women who indulged in sex willingly.”¹⁰²

And in light of this, NARAL’s strategies to protect abortion rights underwent a major transformation—pro-family, pro-privacy, anti-government voters could be convinced to support “pro-choice” initiatives when the issue was framed in these terms, and NARAL would pursue and coddle these voters.¹⁰³

Of course, not everyone at NARAL was happy with this shift. Saletan shows that throughout these larger political struggles over the availability and legality of reproductive rights, internal struggles within NARAL and other reproductive rights organizations also ensued. Like employees at most non-profits, NARAL’s staff and volunteers were over-worked and under-paid, but continued to do this work because they viewed it is central to the struggle for women’s equality and rights. When NARAL’s staff felt uneasy about the rhetorical moves suggested by outside political strategists, debates transpired. It is imperative to understand that many people within these organizations fought bitterly against forfeiting their ideologies for a particular political win. But in the end, the threat of losing specific campaigns trumped the potential benefits (and losses) associated with framing abortion rights within a broader feminist context.

Despite the rhetorical shifts evident in the mid 1980’s—framing abortion rights as a privacy issue, deploying the family as the central decision-making institution, and

¹⁰² Saletan, William. “Electoral Politics and Abortion,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 115.

¹⁰³ It is possible that Saletan is simply too critical of the feminist movement here and views NARAL’s attempts at furthering its ideology as solely strategic and opportunistic when they may have been working to develop coalitions in new ways. Either way, the point here is really that during the 1980’s NARAL began to use a radically different discourse than abortion rights groups had previously relied upon—and that these discursive shifts were connected to changes in the political landscape.

utilizing conservative language—NARAL was not entirely ready to remove women’s experiences from the rhetoric of the abortion debate. In September of 1988, Michelman gave a speech titled, “Why can’t George Bush Hear Women’s Voices?” Two weeks later, in speeches across the country, Michelman “framed abortion squarely as a woman’s issue,” stating:

The common thread that weaves together the policies of George Bush, the votes of Congressmen who refuse to fund abortions for poor women victimized by rape or incest, and the actions of the fanatics who are trying to close the clinics through ‘Operative Rescue,’ is a striking lack of concern for the lives of women. They are united by the conviction that their way is the right [way] for everybody. That women’s lives have little value. That women should not be accorded the moral dignity to exercise their own conscience and convictions.¹⁰⁴

As the saying goes, old habits die hard. Regardless of the strategists push to frame abortion in terms relating to privacy and the family and in opposition to big government that characterized the rhetoric of the mid-1980’s, Michelman returned to the familiar language of women’s rights, women’s voices, and women’s value in her 1988 speeches. In fact, in response to the Supreme Court’s announcement in 1989 that it would hear *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*, Michelman “called a press conference and read a statement full of feminist declarations: ‘This is about much more than just abortion. It is about the lives and dignity of women. Women must control their reproductive lives in order to support themselves, care for families, and insure their health and well-being...What is at stake in *Webster*, is the place women have won in this society and the

¹⁰⁴ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 61.

degree of autonomy we have gained over our lives.”¹⁰⁵ Michelman continued to share with the press the campaign’s new theme: “Million’s of Voices, Silent No More.” She punctuated this with NARAL’s release of *The Voices of Women*, a pamphlet dedicated to sharing women’s experiences with illegal abortions. As Saletan states, “It looked like 1985 all over again.”¹⁰⁶

Within weeks of unveiling the “Millions of Voices, Silent No More” campaign, NARAL’s strategists had devised a new slogan—one they viewed as more palatable and less woman-centered. Based on the results of polling and focus groups, NARAL’s strategists came up with the slogan that would serve them for the next twenty-plus years: “Who Decides? You or Them?” Though the implementation of this campaign slogan caused much internal conflict, the political strategists argued that the benefit of the slogan was that it could be interpreted in multiple ways.

Feminists could take it as an affirmation of women’s right to control their bodies. ‘You’ meant each woman; ‘them’ meant fundamentalists and sexist legislators. Conservatives could take it as a rebuke to big government. ‘Them’ meant nosy, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats; ‘you’ meant families and communities.¹⁰⁷

In light of these purely political moves, it is important to remember that, as Saletan puts it in a related essay, “Political strategies are born of necessity.”¹⁰⁸ By 1989, abortion-rights activists had dealt with a great deal of anti-feminist and anti-abortion backlash, and these concessions were viewed by many as just that—concessions necessary to hold onto the right to legal abortion.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰⁸ Saletan, William. “Electoral Politics and Abortion,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 114.

In April of 1989, one month after the strategists proposed moving away from the “Millions of Voices, Silent No More” campaign, NARAL launched the “Who Decides? You or Them?” campaign, a two million dollar campaign complete with television, radio and print ads. And something else accompanied this launch—abortion “speak-outs,” which were held in 36 states, and not coincidentally on the same day that the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Webster*. In the feminist spirit that produced the notion of “speaking out,” this strategy highlighted the “contextual, affirmative, and feminist” aspects of women’s abortion stories.

But this wasn’t 1985 and this wasn’t the “Silent No More” campaign. Things had shifted. NARAL was concerned that by utilizing women’s stories via the “speak outs,” their abstract anti-government message, which centralized privacy and family, would be lost. It appears, then, that NARAL was experiencing some difficulty negotiating their use of discourses that would both please their feminist constituency and also persuade the general public. As Saletan states, “The passion of 1985 had to make room for the strategic discipline of 1989.”¹⁰⁹

Along with receiving “Who Decides” promotional materials, NARAL’s state affiliates also accepted instructions for dealing with any media that may ask questions about the “speak outs.” All questions were to be given a generic response: “We don’t want politicians and judges taking this private decision away from us.”¹¹⁰ In this case, it is clear who NARAL is framing as the “them” of their “You or Them” equation—

¹⁰⁹ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 79.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

politicians and judges. However, this response does not make clear who the “we” or “us” are that is supposed to make up the “You” part of their campaign. Although this potential media inquiry would be in response to hearing women’s abortion stories, women are not mentioned in the answer NARAL informed its affiliates to use. Again, “we” or “us” could be women, families, doctors or communities.

By 1989, it is clear that using women’s experiences as a basis for arguing for political rights was proving too threatening to NARAL’s new rhetoric supporting privacy and the family and opposing government intrusion. Within this new framework, not only did women’s stories and experiences lack value, they were actually threatening to the ideology behind the rhetoric; if the right to abortion was based in the notion of privacy and the ability of the family to make decisions, women *shouldn’t* make their experiences public. It is not surprising, then, that within this framework, the use of first-person abortion narratives by reproductive rights organizations largely subsided. By the end of the 1980’s, reproductive rights movements had prioritized practical and immediate concerns threatening *Roe* over creating a long-term strategy that would allow women to be at the center of the abortion debate.

1990’s

In 1989, Doug Wilder was the under-dog candidate for the Governor of Virginia; he was a black Democrat in a state of white Republicans. Although he supported parental consent laws and argued that abortion shouldn’t be used as birth control, Wilder had no qualms about packaging himself as the pro-choice candidate. He did this through arguing

that the Republican candidates would each outlaw abortion, even in cases of rape or incest. On the other hand, Wilder agreed to leave Virginia's abortion laws exactly as they were; abortion would remain legal but the government would not pay for it and could continue to restrict it.¹¹¹ Hardly NARAL's version of "pro-choice."

At the same time as Wilder was creating his own version of "pro-choice" politics, his campaign strategists were conducting focus groups and state-wide polls. The strategists found that the focus group participants clearly saw abortion as the right of a woman who had been victimized. And Wilder lined up his "pro-choice" politics with what his campaign viewed as the dominant belief system of voters in Virginia, becoming the first black Governor in United States history.

What Virginians had voted for, Wilder told the ABC audience, was a candidate who had catered not to a pro-choice 'litmus test' but to 'mainstream people.' ... A new breeze was in the air—not a liberal revival, not a feminist enlightenment, but a revolt of conservative voters against pro-life politicians who usurped family authority and ignored criminal justice. Hoisting his sails before that breeze, Wilder, the captain to whom NARAL had entrusted its quest for power, was sweeping the abortion rights movement forward into the New Mainstream.¹¹²

Though Saletan appears to view Wilder's successful campaign as the single catalyst for broader discursive shifts in the strategies used by abortion-rights and anti-abortion activists, it seems more likely that Wilder's campaign was as much a symptom of larger discursive shifts while it also worked to contribute to this shift. In the early 1990's, a major rhetorical shift occurred among both politicians and reproductive rights organizations. Now discussions of abortion and other reproductive health concerns were

¹¹¹ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 88.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 107.

not only framed in terms of privacy, family and government intrusion; a new component had been added: innocence and victimization. The notion of innocence was picked up by advocates both in support of and opposing abortion rights. Abortion rights were no longer guaranteed to all women; instead, they were reserved to those deemed innocent—so in other words, victims of rape or incest. On the flip side, it seemed understood among anti-abortion activists that the fetus was inherently innocent, so according to this discourse, also inherently deserving of rights. While Saletan seems to think that Wilder’s campaign was at the center of this shifting discourse, it seems more useful to think of Wilder’s campaign strategies as marking and reflecting broader changes within both political and activist discourses.

Lauren Berlant’s discussion of the privatization of citizenship and the ways in which contemporary public discourses of citizenship focus on this private intimate sphere complicates Saletan’s portrayal of the emergence of the fetus in public discourse. In other words, the appearance of the fetus as innocent and deserving of rights did not just emerge out of strategic moves within political campaigns. In a chapter titled “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus” in her book *Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Berlant argues that “the ideology of public intimacy has fostered the image of fetal personhood as the icon of ideal citizenship.”¹¹³ Berlant continues to analyze the ways in which images of pregnant women and fetuses have been used to produce a national culture, ideas of citizenship, and notions of personhood since the 1970’s and the rise of the Reaganite right. She uses the “media of reproduction” to

¹¹³ Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. (Durham, Duke University Press: 2005), 22.

analyze the ways in which “new technologies and new modes of representation such as fetal imaging have created a nationwide competition between the mother and the fetus that the fetus, framed as a helpless, choiceless victim, will always lose—at least without the installation of surrogate legal and technological systems to substitute for the mothers dangerous body and fallen will.”¹¹⁴ As Berlant points out, this tension between the fetus and the woman has led anti-abortion advocates to “assum[e] the point of view of victimized citizenship by redefining radically the meaning, the history, and the dimensionality of the body.”¹¹⁵ In other words, the language of fetal citizenship has not only created fetal imagery that depicts the fetus as always already a victim, but also impacts the ways in which women—pregnant or not—are also represented within public discourses.

Both Saletan and Berlant recognize the emergence of discourses based around victimization, innocence and fetal personhood in the 1990’s. While Berlant’s argument focuses on the public emergence of the fetus as victimized citizen and the accompanying rhetoric of anti-abortion advocates, Saletan outlines the ways in which the rhetoric of abortion-rights organizations and politicians also utilized a language of victimization in order to describe women who are deserving of abortion rights. Of course, these arguments are much more intertwined than this brief synopsis allows for; however, the juxtaposition of these arguments allows us to see the ways in which a language of victimization and innocence pervades both anti-abortion and abortion-rights public discourses—as well as the broader culture that these debates emerge out of.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

Curiously, Saletan does not explicitly acknowledge the ways in which the language of innocence is linked to the framing of women seeking abortions in victimizing terms. But the link is clear. In 1990, Michelman responded to a proposed anti-abortion ban, arguing that the legislation “would have consigned countless women—including the most vulnerable, desperate victims of rape and incest—to the back alleys for health care.”¹¹⁶ At the same time as NARAL characterizes women seeking abortions as innocent victims, anti-abortion advocates demonize the women who use abortion as birth control, framing their fetuses as innocent victims. Clearly, women that have repeat abortions are themselves the villains, their fetuses the victims; women pregnant due to rape or incest are clearly the victims, their male perpetrators the demons that created the unfortunate situation. It appears, then, that within this victim/villain binary, there is room only for one victim and one villain. And so, within the anti-abortion and abortion-rights discourses present in the 1990’s, both sides attempted to frame the entity they represented as the victim. In other words, according to the public discourses of abortion-rights advocates, the reason that women deserved abortion privileges was because they were victims of a terrible crime—and thus innocent of any wrongdoing.

By the mid 1990’s, anti-abortion advocates had developed a new strategy in which they sought to “move the abortion debate out of the woman’s body.”¹¹⁷ In order to make this move, anti-abortion advocates focused on the extremely rare abortion procedure known as “dilation and extraction,” which became popularly described as

¹¹⁶ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 175.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

“partial-birth abortion” and quickly came to dominate discussions of abortion in the media, the legislature and eventually even the courts. The procedure, which is generally performed late in the second trimester, consists of a physician dilating the cervix, pulling the fetus feet-first from the womb and then puncturing and draining the skull before extracting the remainder of the body. Anti-abortion advocates argued that this procedure is different from regular abortion because it takes place outside of the woman’s body. Senator Santorum, a Republican from Pennsylvania, argued, “There may be a medical need to terminate a pregnancy, but there is never a need to kill the baby.”¹¹⁸ Santorum, like others in support of banning this specific abortion procedure, separated abortion in general from what they called “partial-birth abortion.”

Of course, it is difficult to make a case for the necessity of a procedure publicly known as “partial-birth abortion.” So, organizations and politicians supporting abortion rights took a two-pronged approach, claiming that the ban did not make adequate provisions for women’s health and it also impeded on the autonomy and authority of doctors. A statement issued by the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy highlights the connections between these positions “This Court has never permitted a State to substitute its judgment for the physician’s about when a woman’s health is compromised.”¹¹⁹ And two additional discourses came to define the rhetorics of abortion rights advocates: doctor’s rights and women’s health.

Carole Joffe, Patricia Anderson and Jody Steinauer offer another explanation that helps to explain more fully the emergence of the discourse of health evident in the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 234.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 258.

1990's. These authors argue that escalating anti-abortion violence—including the bombing of abortion clinics and the murder of abortion providers—in the late 1980's and early 1990's led to a surge in abortion-rights activism within medical circles, and they provide a convincing case: a large meeting of medical professionals and organizations supportive of abortion rights—the first of its kind—took place in 1990, with the financial support of the Ford and Gund foundations; Medical Students for Choice emerged in 1993; and various organizations and medical professionals supportive of abortion-rights fought against congressional attacks on accreditation and training requirements within the medical field in the mid 1990's.

The medical representatives defended the revised standards on medical grounds—explaining the health risks to American women if physicians were not trained in abortion and the management of abortion complications—but they also spoke forcefully against congressional interference in the [Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education]'s internal affairs.¹²⁰

Considering that medical professionals are trained in matters of health and medicine, it is fitting that they would use discourses reflective of their training in order to argue for abortion rights. Clearly, then, the emergence of a health-centered discourse evident in mainstream reproductive rights organizations in the 1990's was due in part to an increase in activism by members of the medical community.

The extent to which this discourse of health impacted dominant reproductive rights discourses cannot be overstated. In fact, this focus on health prompted NARAL to change its name from the National Abortion Rights Action League to the National

¹²⁰ Joffe, Carole, Patricia Anderson, and Jody Steinauer. "The Crisis in Abortion Provision and Pro-Choice Medical Activism in the 1990's," *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 326.

Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. Marcy Wilder argues that this name change should not be taken lightly, “For the first time in history, NARAL expanded its mission beyond abortion and made a commitment to use the political process to help ensure that women have a full range of reproductive choices, including preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children, and choosing legal abortion.” She continues,

The name change and expanded mission reveal a deeper change within the pro-choice movement. Trying to break out of single-issue politics and to shed an agenda that helped anti-choice forces isolate the procedure and demonize abortion providers, the pro-choice movement is beginning to articulate clearly the values and vision that underlie its political program. A campaign to promote pro-choice values and access to a full range of reproductive health services will reduce the need for abortion and significantly improve reproductive health across the country. Failure will mean more of the same sorry abortion war that has let America’s reproductive health crisis fester. Success at promoting the information and services women and men need to make informed, responsible decisions about childbearing will advance the health of families, society, and our nation.¹²¹

Wilder’s discussion of NARAL’s name change highlights the impact of the discourses of health on reproductive rights organizations. But her discussion goes beyond articulating this impact to suggest that the discourse of health is much more pervasive than even Wilder acknowledges. In fact, Wilder utilizes a health-infused discourse in order to discuss the impacts of NARAL’s name and mission change. In the last two sentences above, Wilder uses the phrase “reproductive health” four times, ending with a statement on the health of families, society and our nation. Shortly before this she acknowledges the

¹²¹ Wilder, Marcy. “The Rule of Law, The Rise of Violence, and the Role of Morality: Reframing America’s Abortion Debate,” *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Rickie Solinger, Ed. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1998), 76.

fact that abortion has been removed from the rest of medicine (“isolation of the procedure”) and that abortion providers face demonization. In making these sorts of claims, Wilder actually invokes the language she analyzes, suggesting that the health-infused rhetoric is impacting the ways that many people—not solely abortion rights organizations—are discursively framing the issue of abortion rights.

NARAL’s name change also suggests that the shift to a discourse of health evident in the 1990’s is the result of more than the influences of political campaigns and the medical community. In other words, NARAL—the country’s largest organization dedicated to the political aspects of abortion rights—would not have made such a monumental move based solely on the discourses of those outside of the movement; something else was going on—and that something was criticism from women of color and leftist feminists within the movement. By the mid-1990’s, this criticism was nothing new.

Since the late 1970’s, women of color and socialist feminists had been arguing for a broader reproductive rights agenda that included, as Wilder states, “access to a full range of reproductive health services.” For example, Jennifer Nelson argues that the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA):

defined their politics in opposition to feminist and abortion rights groups that defended legal abortion as a single-issue campaign—such as NARAL....CARASA members applied the terms reproductive rights/reproductive freedom to a series of linked requirements that would provide a material context for reproductive decisions without coercion: they demanded welfare rights, subsidized childcare for low-income women, workplace safety, and an end to sterilization abuse.¹²²

¹²² Nelson, Jennifer. *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York City: NYU Press: 2003), 137.

This division between viewing abortion rights as a single issue rather than as part of a broader struggle is what has historically set organizations such as CARASA apart from the more mainstream reproductive rights organizations. In *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*, Jael Silliman et al make a distinction between the mainstream pro-choice movement (including organizations such as NARAL and Planned Parenthood), the reproductive rights movement (CARASA) and the women's health movement (National Women's Health Network). Silliman et al state, "While there was some overlap in membership and in politics, the women's health movement developed outside and alongside the pro-choice and reproductive rights movements."¹²³ Beginning in 1969, the women's health movement was largely a "decentralized movement of grassroots organizations."¹²⁴ By 1975, activists in the women's health movement developed the National Women's Health Lobby to both lobby and also to monitor federal health organizations based in D.C. As Silliman et al point out, "The network was a key player in the women's health movement in general and was particularly important to women of color, emphasizing organizational support for activists of color from the outset."¹²⁵ Thus, it should be clear that discourses of reproductive health are intricately connected to the work of women of color within the

¹²³ "The Political Context for Women of Color Organizing." Ed. Silliman, Jael, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross and Elena Gutierrez. *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, South End Press: 2004), 34.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 35.

reproductive rights movement, and furthermore, that the relationship between these discourses and the mainstream reproductive rights movement is deep and complex.¹²⁶

Yet, despite these suggestions and critiques by women of color evident over the past thirty years, mainstream reproductive rights organizations did not adopt discourses of health until the mid 1990's; this emergence of health discourses was both as a response to the conservative right and also as a long-overdue response to charges of racism from within the reproductive rights movement, suggesting that discourses—especially those of dominant mainstream organizations—are multiply constructed.

While this previous section has focused on the ways that a discourse of health came to dominate the discourses of both anti-abortion and abortion-rights supporters during the 1990's, it appears that members on both sides of the debate have continued to use a health-infused discourse into the early 2000's. This point can be best proven by turning to the language used in public debates over stem cell research. As Saletan argues, the issues surrounding stem cell research had a definite impact on the rhetorics of both supporters and opponents of abortion rights. In 2002, Michelman argued that by defining embryos as “human subjects” deserving of protection in medical studies, medical research was being politicized “at the expense of women’s health.”¹²⁷ Through this

¹²⁶ Here I use the term “reproductive rights movement” to refer to the mainstream reproductive rights movement, without distinguishing between various aspects of this movement, as I’m not sure that the distinctions made by Silliman et al continue to apply contemporarily. As part of an interview that Jennifer Nelson conducted with Marlene Gerber Fried for *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, Fried states that mainstream reproductive rights organizations are now “better at linking issues than it was in the 1970’s and 1980’s...people in mainstream organizations have a broader consciousness beyond abortion” that includes many aspects of reproductive justice, though Fried argues that there is still not enough emphasis on economic issues and welfare reform (187).

¹²⁷ Saletan, William. *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2003), 278

example alone, it is clear that reproductive rights organizations continued to utilize a discourse of health into the 2000's.¹²⁸

Discourses Used by Organizations and the Connections to Abortion Narratives

So, what does this history of reproductive rights discourses have to do with the form, content and use of abortion narratives? The next part of this chapter will highlight two connections: These discourses emerge in the narratives. In 1985, when pro-family discourses were shaping abortion as a family issue, Judy shared her illegal abortion experience, stating, “Painful as the decision was—for the sake of my two children and my husband—as well as myself—I could not have another [child].”¹²⁹ Furthermore, in the narratives posted online during the 2000's, it is possible to see remnants of all of these discursive strategies used from 1969 to the present. In other words, in order to discuss their abortions within contemporary narratives, women utilize terminology associated with feminism, privacy, family, victimization, anti-government intrusion, and health—though utilizing a language of innocence and victimization appears to be the discursive strategy most present currently.

Within the narratives posted on the “I’m Not Sorry” website, which was created in 2003, women overwhelmingly characterize themselves as innocent victims. When the language of innocence and victimization began to dominate abortion-rights discourse in

¹²⁸ While I haven't yet had the opportunity to fully explore the online rhetorics of dominant reproductive rights organizations outside of their use of abortion narratives, it appears that within both mass email and listserv updates as well as their organizational websites, mainstream organizations are also currently shaping their messages within health-infused rhetorics.

¹²⁹ *The Voices of Women—Abortion: In Their Own Words*. National Abortion Rights Action League (Washington D.C.: 1985), 13.

the 1990's, it almost always centered around the woman as a victim of rape or incest. While this theme does emerge in some of the post-*Roe* narratives posted online, the notion of innocence generally manifests itself in one of two forms in these narratives shared after 2003: 1.) the woman is a victim of a birth control failure or 2.) the woman is a victim of getting pregnant her first time having intercourse. In neither situation does the woman fit the stereotype of women seeking abortions as careless, over-sexed, or using abortion as a form of birth control. In other less common circumstances, the woman narrating her experience describes herself as a victim of her husband's infidelity or abuse, and thus unwilling to either be a single parent or bring a child into an abusive environment.

Consider Julia's story: "I was always very careful about contraception, using a diaphragm. Then I switched to a different method of contraception shortly before getting married, thinking that an IUD would be more convenient, and the IUD (a Lippes Loop) failed."¹³⁰ Cath tells a similar story, stating, "I was a university student, aged 22 when I discovered (in spite of careful birth control) that I was pregnant."¹³¹ Women that share the stories of multiple abortions generally blame contraceptive failures for each unwanted pregnancy. Julie's story highlights this point: "Although I had used a diaphragm, it failed to prevent the pregnancy." Two years later she, "conceived again, despite using a diaphragm."¹³² Anne has had four abortions, and tells a similar story: "All of my pregnancies were because of the failure of birth control. Hole in the condom, antibiotics

¹³⁰ I'm Not Sorry, "Julia's Story," <http://www.imnotsorry.net/julia.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

¹³¹ I'm Not Sorry, "Cath's Story," <http://www.imnotsorry.net/cath.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

¹³² I'm Not Sorry, "Julie's Story," <http://www.imnotsorry.net/julie.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

interfering with the pill, ill-fitting cervical cap, rape during a time of abstinence—you name it, it happened to me.”¹³³

The second common way that women frame their victimization is by stating that the pregnancy occurred during their first sexual encounter—either when she lost her virginity or her first time with a new partner. Brandy states, “My story also proves that you can get pregnant your first time, and yes, it happens to good girls. I was a straight A, honor student, in student council and I never got in any trouble, ever. I was with my boyfriend for over a year and we decided to have sex for the first time on Valentine’s Day. We used condoms, but in retrospect, we most likely didn’t use them effectively.”¹³⁴

While women tend to frame their victimization by describing their pregnancy either as a result of birth control failure or as a result of a first sexual encounter, often these two distinct reasons overlap. In other words, women who frame themselves as innocent often blame their pregnancies on both a failure of birth control and claim that it happened during their first time (sometimes in describing a single pregnancy, and other times will use one defense in explaining two different pregnancies). Anne’s story reflects this point, “I’ve had two abortions. Both resulted from contraceptive failures. (Did you know that some antibiotics can counteract the Pill? Neither did the doctor who prescribed the Pill for me).” Twenty years later, she learned she was pregnant again. “This happened the very first time I was messing around with a new partner.”¹³⁵

¹³³ I’m Not Sorry, “Anne’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/anneA.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

¹³⁴ I’m Not Sorry, “Brandy’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/brandy.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

¹³⁵ I’m Not Sorry, “Anne’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/anne.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

Other women tell a story in which manipulation is part of their victimization. Chris shares her story, “I insisted on condoms, even though he didn’t like them. Little did I know, he was slipping them off during sex.”¹³⁶ Clearly, Chris sees her pregnancy as a result of her partner’s actions, rather than as a signifier of her own wrongdoing.

The second connection between reproductive rights discourses and abortion narratives is that within the current rhetorical strategies of reproductive rights movements, I argue there is no room for the use of narratives. So, abortion-rights narratives are emerging in other places, namely websites run by individuals as opposed to those operated by reproductive rights organizations. Interestingly, this is not true within anti-abortion organizations and campaigns—in fact, anti-abortion campaigns are making narratives central to their work. In the following chapter, I look specifically to the 2006 abortion ban in South Dakota to make these claims. I argue that this use of narratives is directly related to the fact that anti-abortion organizations and campaigns are using broader discourses that involve women—and the use of women’s experiences is a valuable tool within that rhetorical framework

As stated above, the use of abortion narratives by leading reproductive rights organizations seems to have subsided in the mid 1980’s; when the “Who Decides? You or Them?” campaign replaced the newly-revealed “Millions of Voices, Silent No More” campaign, a significant shift in reproductive rights discourses emerged. And this use of abortion narratives has not since re-emerged within the public discourses of organizations fighting for reproductive rights. Interestingly, first person abortion narratives have

¹³⁶ I’m Not Sorry, “Chris’s Story,” <http://www.imnotsorry.net/chris.htm> (accessed on 11/12/2007).

emerged in other places, such as anti-abortion campaigns and websites maintained by individuals in support of abortion rights.

In the following section, I map the use of abortion narratives by advocates for abortion rights onto a timeline, beginning in 1969 and continuing through 2003. Through both the timeline itself as well as a fairly detailed discussion of the timeline, I hope that both the gaps and influxes in the usage of abortion narratives will become increasingly apparent.

Timeline of the Use of Narratives by Advocates of Abortion-Rights:

- **1969**
 - Redstockings' speak-out on abortion
- **1985**
 - NARAL unveils their "Millions of Voices Silent No More" campaign, which includes the release of the booklet "The Voices of Women: Abortion in Their Own Words." The booklet contains 15 narratives—5 stories dedicated to legal abortion and 10 to experiences with illegal abortion.
- **1988**
 - Publication of *Back Rooms: An Oral History of the Illegal Abortion Era* edited by Ellen Messer and Kathryn May.
- **1991**
 - Journalist Angela Bonavoglia releases *The Choices We Made*, which includes twenty-five stories (generally) written by famous people talking about their illegal abortions.
- **1993**
 - Publication of *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops and Children of Women who Died Talk About its Horrors*; (which is extremely similar to *Back Rooms*) edited by Patricia Miller, a lawyer and abortion rights activist who was instrumental in passing Colorado's liberal abortion law in 1967.

- **2001**
 - 2nd edition of *The Choices We Made* is released
- **2002**
 - Publication of *Behind Every Choice is a Story*, a compilation of stories on both illegal and legal abortions. Gloria Feldt, former President of Planned Parenthood, is the editor. Though this book does include narratives, these narratives are not the crux of Feldt’s story—which is largely her own.
- **2003**
 - Emergence of “I’m Not Sorry” website.

Discussion of Timeline

From this timeline, it is clear that narratives have not been used consistently in the fight for reproductive rights either by individuals or by organizations. Although narratives were a very successful part of the Redstockings campaign for abortion rights in 1969, it appears that the use of narratives as a strategy for fighting for reproductive rights did not emerge again for sixteen years, or until 1985.¹³⁷ After this extended hiatus, it is noteworthy that three collections of narratives were published, in addition to NARAL’s booklet, in a span of just seven years (1985-1992). All three books are remarkably similar and seek to re-create the aura of the illegal abortion era.

This surge in the publication of narratives evident in the late 1980’s-early 1990’s ends in 1993 and is followed by a nearly-decade-long gap in the production and publication of narratives; this gap ends with the release of the second edition of *The Choices We Made* in 2001. By 2002, a second collection of narratives emerged, though

¹³⁷ It is important to remember that this particular research only looked at the strategies and discourses used by dominant or mainstream reproductive rights organizations and campaigns. It is possible that this timeline would differ if I had conducted a comprehensive analysis of the discourses and strategies utilized by a greater variety of groups working toward reproductive justice.

Gloria Feldt's *Behind Every Choice is a Story* is different from the other collections in an obvious way—she combines her personal narrative as the former Director of Planned Parenthood with political commentary as well as the stories of women that wrote to her. This raises an important point: aside from NARAL's little booklet, all four of these collections were published by individuals—with varying degrees of connections to reproductive rights organizations—rather than by organizations themselves.

In terms of the history of the use of abortion narratives, a second major event took place in 2003—Patricia Beninato created the “I'm Not Sorry” website after participating in an online conversation around the time of *Roe v. Wade*'s 30th anniversary. According to Beninato, she felt that the anti-abortion narratives posted online were not reflective of most women's experiences with abortion. She claims that by 2003 dozens of sites existed that contained women's stories on negative experiences with abortion, and that searching for sites that focused on positive abortion experiences yielded the same results because the type of site conceived by Beninato did not exist.

Though I cannot definitively identify what created the two major gaps in the use of narratives outlined above—from 1969-1985 and again from 1992-2001—my hypothesis is that these gaps are due to both 1) the notion of progress that is evident in many of the narratives—especially those written on experiences with illegal abortions and 2.) the rhetoric of privacy and family that came to dominate the debates over reproductive rights during the 1980's. Let me explain: If legal abortion rights represented progress, what would be the function of sharing women's abortion stories during the 1970's? It wasn't until the threat of losing those rights became clear that abortion-rights

activists began to share the tale of scary back-alley days in order to make a case for keeping abortion legal. Furthermore, within the pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government rhetoric dominating reproductive rights discourses in the 1980's, there was no room for women's experiences. In other words, if an issue is described as private and to be decided within one's family, this does not create the public space for women to be able to share their personal abortion stories; if something is considered private, one would not discuss it in public.

It is worth pointing out that of the four collections of abortion narratives published between 1985-1993, a mere five stories are included that contain experiences with legal abortion; clearly, the narratives collected and published focused almost wholly on illegal abortion. They had one focus: to remind Americans of the problems with illegal abortion. In doing so, each of these collections sets up a pre-*Roe* vs. post-*Roe* dichotomy in which illegal abortions are framed as inherently bad and legal abortions represent liberation. In the Introduction to *Back Rooms*, Messer and May state:

It's hard to believe that it has been only fifteen years since we left behind an epoch when women agonized over what to do with an unwanted pregnancy. In its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, the Supreme Court ensured reproductive choice for women by legalizing abortion. In the short time since then, we have developed a cultural amnesia so complete that young people appear to have no real knowledge about the shame and illegality which haunted the lives of their mothers and grandmothers for more than one hundred years in America.

For Messer, May and the other editors of these collections produced in the late 1980's-early 1990's, it is clear they believe that women facing an unwanted pregnancy in 1985 experienced the situation much differently than a woman had in 1965. For these editors,

Roe v. Wade, and the subsequent legality of abortion, was the obvious solution to the issues women faced in obtaining and dealing with an illegal abortion. This notion of progress—evident in the framing of illegal as bad, legal as good—is imbedded in each of the three collections that focus on illegal abortion. Considering the focus on the terrors of illegality, the narratives produced at this time were not interested in discussing issues that women faced in dealing with legal abortion at the time, how these issues may have shifted since 1973, or acknowledging the then-current challenges to women's access to abortion. By strictly describing the horrors of illegal abortion, and framing these issues as things that women did not deal with in choosing legal abortion, it is not surprising that it took another decade before online collections of narratives focusing on legal abortion emerged.

The combination of both the pro-privacy, pro-family rhetoric and also this notion of legal abortion as a walk-in-the-park did not lend itself easily to creating a space where women can define and discuss their abortion experiences. In other words, if abortion is a private decision, what is there to talk about publicly? And if legal abortion signified positive progress for women, what parts of their experiences would women need to share?

While the previous section has offered a hypothesis to account for the gaps in narratives, I have not yet offered any potential reasons for the emergence of narratives. It appears that the use of abortion narratives as a political strategy largely subsided after the *Roe v. Wade* decision was handed down until it was clear in the 1980's that *Roe* was threatened. By the mid 1980's, narratives began to re-emerge. The editors of the first

group of collections that were published during the late 1980's-early 1990's make the missions of their projects very clear. In *The Worst of Times*, Patricia Miller states, "The purpose of this book is to convey what life was like for women in this country in the days before *Roe v. Wade*—to remind Americans old enough to remember, and to explain to the many more young enough never to have known."¹³⁸ The introduction to NARAL's booklet states, "A small but vocal group of anti-choice extremists is nonetheless attempting to take away a woman's right to reproductive choice. They have used a variety of tactics, including violence and harassment, in an attempt to deny women the fundamental right of self-determination." The introduction ends "We are your wives, your sisters, your daughters, your mothers and your friends...Please hear us."¹³⁹ These collections produced in the late 80's and early 90's, then, are not only an attempt to re-create an understanding of the illegal abortion era, but also serve as a response to both anti-abortion political gains and also the increasingly violent tactics used by anti-abortion advocates during this same time period.

Another absence of narratives is evident from 1993 to 2001, and ended with the release of the second edition of Bonavoglia's book in 2001. One year later, Gloria Feldt's book was published. By this point (2002) anti-abortion organizations and individual activists were using narratives in ways that abortion-rights advocates were not. In fact, when Patricia Beninato conceived of creating the "I'm Not Sorry" website in 2003, she claims that no other unapologetically pro-choice websites existed that contained a space

¹³⁸ Miller, Patricia C. *The Worst of Times: Illegal Abortion—Survivors, Practitioners, Coroners, Cops, and Children of Women Who Died Talk About Its Horrors*. (New York, Harper Collins:1993), 1.

¹³⁹ *The Voices of Women. Abortion: In Their Own Words*. National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL). (Washington, D.C.: 1985), 3-4.

for women to share their positive abortion stories in their own words, though in searching for positive abortion stories, she did manage to find dozens of anti-abortion sites utilizing narratives. It is especially important that Beninato created this website in response to claims she found unrepresentative or false on anti-abortion websites, as this makes it clear that by 2003 anti-abortion websites were utilizing abortion narratives in ways that abortion-rights supporters were not.

Only thirty-two of the seven hundred narratives posted at “I’m Not Sorry” fall under the “Before Their Was *Roe*” category. Clearly, Beninato marks narratives on pre-*Roe* abortions as slightly different, but these narratives do not form the crux of her project, which is to respond to anti-abortion narratives and claims through the use of narratives that describe positive experiences with abortion. While the influx of narratives in the late 80’s-early 90’s is a response to broader anti-abortion gains and violence, the group of narratives posted online and produced in the early 2000’s seems to serve as a response to the claims made within anti-abortion narratives.

By offering a detailed account of the discursive shifts in the mainstream reproductive rights movement from the 1960’s to the present and subsequently linking the use of abortion narratives to these dominant discourses, this chapter highlights the connections between political ideologies, discursive strategies and abortion narratives. I argue that the form, content, emergence and utilization of abortion narratives are directly related to the discourses and ideologies dominant within reproductive rights organizations (and the broader public) at any particular historical moment. From this discussion it is clear that over the past forty years abortion narratives have been used strategically and

politically in the battle for abortion rights—and that the content of these narratives is shaped by the needs of the movement. The following chapter looks to the 2006 abortion ban in South Dakota to provide a tangible example of the ways in which discursive strategies and political ideologies continue to impact the contemporary uses of abortion narratives.

CHAPTER THREE: CURRENT USES OF ABORTION NARRATIVES

While the first chapter analyzes themes that emerge across abortion narratives and the second chapter discusses the discursive strategies that dominated mainstream reproductive rights organizations from the 1960's to the present in order to connect the utilization of abortion narratives by mainstream reproductive rights organizations to these dominant discourses, this chapter seeks to understand how abortion narratives are being utilized contemporarily. In order to do this, I first provide a sort of “map” describing themes and patterns that I've noticed when digging around for contemporary abortion narratives. Because no new accounts of abortion narratives have been published in print since 1993, my discussion of contemporary uses of abortion narratives is limited to the internet.¹⁴⁰ Of course, the nature of the web makes it difficult to make claims about emergent themes and patterns one finds evident, for as soon as you develop an argument, there will always be a site to contradict your claims. Nonetheless, I hope that this section will provide an overview of general patterns in the ways that abortion narratives seem to be emerging at this present moment.

The second part of this chapter looks at the discourses that surrounded South Dakota's abortion ban in 2006. By looking at the rhetorics used by the campaigns working for and against legal abortion rights in South Dakota—on their campaign websites, at political rallies and in the mainstream media—and identifying the use of abortion narratives by only the anti-abortion campaign, this chapter offers a tangible

¹⁴⁰ I make this claim because the version of *The Choices we Made* (printed in 2001) was a second edition, and Gloria Feldt's book seems more committed to utilizing others' narratives in order to tell her own story rather than featuring them on their own.

example of the deep connections between discourses and the utilization of narratives, arguing that the use of abortion narratives by mainstream abortion-rights and anti-abortion movements and campaigns is intricately connected to their broader discursive and political strategies.

Overview of Contemporary Applications of Abortion Narratives

Anti-abortion organizations are using narratives in various capacities—some contain abortion narratives on their homepage, while other narratives appear several links away from the main page on different websites. Most anti-abortion sites utilize various rhetorical strategies to make their claims—photos of fetuses in the womb, bible passages, quotes from famous people, graphic depictions of aborted fetuses, and narratives by a wide variety of people: women that experienced a crisis pregnancy and decided to parent, women who regretted their decision to abort, and the experiences of people that are active in the movement. In addition to making God and religion central to their projects, these sites also typically and clearly contain anti-gay and anti-sex (outside of marriage) sentiments, which also show up in the narratives posted on their sites.

To a lesser extent, some anti-abortion websites exist for the sole purpose of creating a space for women to share their stories, though these are generally websites run by individuals rather than organizations. The narratives posted on these sites also tend to reflect the claims made within a growing subset of narratives framed as feminist that state their genuine concern with the negative impacts of abortion on women. The narratives posted on “Abortion Concern” fall into this category.

While anti-abortion organizations are frequently incorporating women's narratives into their broader messages, this is not true for abortion-rights organizations. And when abortion-rights organizations do utilize abortion narratives, it is not nearly as central to their project as it is for anti-abortion groups. Furthermore, single issue organizations seem more likely to use narratives than multi-issue organizations. For example, neither Concerned Women for America nor the National Organization for Women utilize narratives on their websites, but both Feminists for Life and Planned Parenthood do—though the Feminists for Life website utilizes narratives in a more prominent manner and to a greater degree. In other words, Planned Parenthood, NARAL and Choice USA each post narratives on their websites but only a few stories are shared and these narratives are posted multiple links away from the main page. In each of these circumstances, the narratives are quite difficult to find, even if one is seeking them out. On the other hand, the Feminists for Life homepage contains a direct link to women's anti-abortion stories.

When single-issue organizations dedicated to reproductive rights do use narratives, the stories are now framed within a discourse of activism. Abortion narratives have been replaced by stories that focus on why an individual is committed to reproductive freedom; the authors of these stories may or may not discuss their dedication to the cause in relation to their own experiences, though this is rarely connected to a personal experience with abortion. Part of this shift in the content of the narratives may be due to the ways that these stories are framed by the organizations soliciting them; in order to submit a narrative, the author must go under the "Take

Action” or “Get Involved” sections of these websites. There is no way to submit one’s narrative by clicking on the button titled “Abortion.” Although reproductive rights organizations continue to solicit stories from abortion-rights supporters, these stories are no longer abortion narratives, but rather are framed as a way for supporters to take action and get involved. And, again, it is important to remember that abortion narratives are much less a part of contemporary abortion-rights websites and strategies than anti-abortion messages.

The descriptions of the various ways in which abortion narratives are currently being used can be best brought to life with specific examples. The following section looks to the various rhetorical strategies used by both advocates for and opponents of South Dakota’s abortion ban in 2006. By turning to the discourses that surrounded South Dakota’s abortion ban—which was passed by the state legislature, signed into law by the Governor and overturned by South Dakotan voters in 2006—the following section highlights the various discourses that advocates both for and against abortion are currently using and the ways that these broader discursive strategies impact the use of narratives.

Why South Dakota?

South Dakota is an especially interesting place to consider for many reasons. It is generally thought among academics and activists that the discourses of movements

emerge out of large cities on the coasts.¹⁴¹ According to this way of thinking, these discourses then impact the ways in which campaigns are fought and movements organize; however, in the case of the South Dakota abortion ban, it is clear that the local climate, political beliefs and discourses impacted the ways in which national organizations discussed abortion as much as it was impacted by outside agencies. By considering this particular campaign, I attempt to disrupt the urban/rural dichotomy by highlighting the ways in which the discourses are similar to and different from dominant reproductive rights discourse. As discussed in the history of the dominant rhetorics utilized by reproductive rights organizations, a pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government intrusion discourse dominated in the 1980's; however, from the early 2000's until the present, a language of health has dominated mainstream abortion rights discourse. Clearly, the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families does not follow this shift, but rather utilizes a discourse reflective of the rhetoric that dominated reproductive rights discourse in the 1980's and also sparingly incorporates images of sexually victimized women and discussions of health into their dominant messages. In doing so, the South Dakota campaign forged a distinct rhetoric both reflective of and challenging to dominant reproductive rights discourses.

The shifting rhetorics used in various aspects of the South Dakota campaign make one thing very clear: All of the discourses utilized by reproductive rights organizations at various points in history still emerge in present discourses; furthermore, the form the

¹⁴¹ Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* works to disrupt this idea and has been instrumental in helping me to work through the discourses that surround South Dakota's abortion ban.

discourse takes is directly linked to the audience it is intended for. In other words, reproductive rights organizations host rallies, protests and marches aimed at their own constituencies. The dominant rhetoric at these events is reminiscent of the feminist, woman-centered rhetoric common in the 1960's and 1970's. Political campaigns, which are generally aimed at broader publics, tend to use the pro-family, pro-privacy and anti-government intrusion discourse—language that dominated reproductive rights discourse in the 80's. And the language of victimization and innocence—prevalent in the 1990's—emerges frequently in contemporary abortion-rights narratives, though narratives are not used as part of the South Dakota campaign that supports abortion rights. Instead, narratives emerge as part of the 2006 Vote Yes For Life campaign.

Aside from the reasons outlined above, I have also chosen this particular campaign for a variety of additional reasons: it is the most recent and most severe attempt to ban all abortions at the state level, and the heightened tensions that this severity led to creates an interesting space from which to analyze the rhetoric being employed; much like Ginsburg identified Fargo, North Dakota as a microcosm from which shifts in the national abortion debate could be viewed in the 1980's, I believe that by analyzing the discourses utilized in South Dakota in 2006, it may be possible to identify patterns in strategies on a national level (in other words, the ways in which abortion narratives emerge within the anti-abortion campaign may provide insights as to the ways that the utilization of narratives is connected to broader discursive strategies nationally);¹⁴² furthermore I was born and raised in a small town in South Dakota, and due to previous

¹⁴² Ginsburg, Faye. *Contested Lives: Abortion Debate in an American Community*. 2nd Edition. (Berkeley, University of California: 1998), xviii.

work with NARAL Pro-Choice Minnesota, I was offered an opportunity to go home to volunteer with this campaign. In other words, part of my interest in analyzing the discourses used in this particular campaign is because I have a personal connection to it, have somewhat of an insider's perspective, and understand the broader political climate in South Dakota that created the possibility for, as well as the voter's refusal of, the abortion ban.

South Dakota Campaign

In 2006 the South Dakota legislature banned all abortions in the state; Governor Rounds quickly and proudly signed the ban into law, though this was obviously an illegal move as it directly challenged *Roe v. Wade*. According to the ban's supporters, an exception could be made in cases where the woman's life was in danger, though doctors would also need to make all attempts to save the fetus. No exceptions were made for rape, incest or health of the mother—making this one of the most restrictive (attempted) abortion bans in the country. Volunteers and reproductive rights advocates collected 38,000 signatures (twice as many as were necessary in this state with a population of 750,000) to refer the issue back to the voters in the November election. And South Dakotan voters overwhelmingly overturned the ban.

Unfortunately for mainstream South Dakotans and advocates of reproductive rights around the world, since November 2006, the Vote Yes For Life campaign has continued to work on banning abortion in the state; voters will be asked to decide on the issue again, though the 2008 proposed ban now includes exceptions for pregnancies

resulting from rape and incest. With the Vote Yes for Life campaign still active and pushing for legislation to ban abortion, it is not surprising that the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, a coalition of “pro-choice” South Dakotan leaders created in 2006 in order to work on overturning the ban, has also decided to remain active.

By looking to the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, it is possible to see the ways in which the multiple discourses outlined above emerge within a recent campaign. Although I am not prepared to argue that the rhetorics used in this campaign reflect broader trends in reproductive rights discourses present in the mid to late 2000’s,¹⁴³ the discourses surrounding the South Dakota abortion ban, and the use of narratives by anti-abortion advocates suggest deep connections between broader discursive strategies and the potential utilization of narratives. Importantly, the Vote Yes for Life campaign utilizes narratives within the media, on their website and at their rallies in ways that the abortion-rights campaign is not.

Through looking at three specific discursive aspects of both campaigns— the websites of the SD Campaign for Healthy Families and the Vote Yes For Life campaign, media and commercials, and public rallies or protests—it becomes clear that the various discourses used historically (feminist and woman-centered; pro-privacy, pro-family and anti-government intrusion; innocence and victimization; health) are recycled and reused in this campaign in complex and differing ways. Take, for instance, the name of the

¹⁴³ This would require a type of research I simply have not conducted. To be able to make this claim, I would need internal memos from reproductive rights organizations, court documents, the texts of various types of legislation, websites, etc.

abortion-rights campaign: South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families. Even within the title of the organization, two discourses dominant at different points in history—pro-family rhetoric in the 1980's and health-infused language in the late 1990's and early 2000's—are evident within this campaign name.

To be clear, I am analyzing specifically the discourses used by both proponents and opponents of the 2006 abortion ban in South Dakota. The potential for confusion lies in the fact that on March 31st, 2008 the Vote Yes For Life campaign submitted just over 46,000 signatures to refer the issue back to the voters for a second time. Unless otherwise mentioned, I will not be addressing the campaign tactics being used currently. Instead, I focus on the mainstream news coverage, campaign commercials and rallies that were a part of the 2006 campaign. When it comes to campaign websites, on the other hand, the distinctions between the 2006 and 2008 campaigns get much murkier. The South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families website changed little from 2006 to 2008, and appears to be essentially the same website with minor updates and revisions since the last battle. Because of this, there is no online record of the specific website used in 2006.

Alternatively, the approach of the Vote Yes For Life campaign has changed drastically over the course of the past two years. The new face of their campaign is accompanied by a new website, which is dramatically different from the 2006 version of their website. These differences will be briefly discussed later in this chapter.

I bring up this shift for one reason: to make it clear that while I am analyzing specifically the 2006 abortion ban in South Dakota and the campaigns that worked both for and against it, the text I analyze from The South Dakota Campaign for Healthy

Families website homepage is actually from their 2008 campaign, as their 2006 website was minimally revised for the 2008 campaign. In other words, I am comparing the 2006 campaign website of the Vote Yes For Life Campaign with the 2008 website of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families. While this may seem problematic, I have few qualms about this approach because I believe that the ideology, rhetoric and strategies of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families has changed so little in the past two years that one would have a difficult time differentiating between them.

Websites

In the case of the South Dakota abortion ban, the websites of the leading anti-abortion and abortion-rights organizations tell us a great deal about their rhetorical strategies. The South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families website homepage, decorated with photographs of families that appear to be happy and healthy, begins:

We want to know, "Have you had enough?"

Just last year, South Dakota voters rejected an abortion ban. That election created a bitter debate that pitted neighbor against neighbor and divided our communities. State legislators have done enough. Now it's up to South Dakota's families.

It's time to heal and move forward. Sign this petition and ask the South Dakota Legislature to please stop fighting over abortion and dividing our communities and to spend more time focusing on issues such as health care, education funding, and economic development.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, "Home," <http://www.sdhealthyfamilies.org/index.php> (accessed on 3/30/08).

In this passage, the government is framed as the cause of neighborhood disruptions and divided communities. And how are these legislators that have “done enough” harm going to be stopped? That’s right—South Dakota’s families. In making this argument, the SD Campaign for Healthy Families pits families against government, implying that abortion is a family decision and stating that the government should focus on other pressing issues. Never once in this passage on families and government is the word “woman” used. In fact, with the removal of the term “abortion” that appears twice in this passage, it would be possible to use these same paragraphs to describe any legislature discussing any economic or social issue.

Clicking on the “About” tab brings up the following statement describing how the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families came to be, their members, and briefly, their beliefs.

The South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families was formed in 2006 to refer and defeat HB 1215, later known as Referred Law 6, or the South Dakota abortion ban. Since then, we have remained organized in preparation to defend against future efforts to restrict access to reproductive health care in South Dakota.

The organization is a bipartisan group of citizens that represents a cross-section of South Dakota political leaders, health care workers, pastors and other community members who are concerned that the abortion ban initiative circulating for 2008, like the previous ban, is detrimental to the health and well being of women and families in South Dakota and would cost taxpayers millions to defend in court battles.¹⁴⁵

In this section, the word “women” is used one time and is combined with “families.” By looking at this section of text, it would be entirely possible to miss that abortion has

¹⁴⁵ South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, “About Us,” <http://www.sdhealthyfamilies.org/about-us.php> (accessed on 3/30/08).

traditionally been framed as a woman's issue and that women are the ones that actually experience abortion. These two passages above highlight the ways in which pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government intrusion, and health rhetorics mark the public image of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families.

The Vote Yes For Life campaign website is radically different, and explicitly frames abortion as a woman's issue. The following excerpt comes from the campaign philosophy on the "About Us" webpage.

This campaign is about the South Dakota women who have faced unplanned pregnancies and are sharing their stories. From the 14 year old who decided to parent her child, and now has a beautiful family (she is now 25 and married the father of her child); to the twenty-something who chose abortion and "felt like a vapor" afterward, the South Dakota women are coming forward to share their stories. Another woman who is speaking out is a 19 year-old college student who says, "you don't give away things you want so I chose adoption for my son." A 21 year-old recent college graduate shares her indecision at facing the possibility of abortion, and her joy when she decided to choose life instead of abortion. The joy turned to anguish when she learned her daughter had a severe neural tube defect; but her story concludes with her everlasting love and cherished memories for her daughter who not only survived birth, despite the doctor's prognosis, but lived for 32 amazing days. Another 20-year old shares her story of being drugged and raped. Despite being a virgin before the rape, she chose to give birth to the child conceived during violence. Maria, the child of rape, is now approaching 2 years old, and is loved beyond belief. This Maria's birth [sic] brought healing to the rape survivor and her family, justice and forgiveness to the rapist, and consolation to the mother of the perpetrator (who was convicted of the crime).

These awesome women all faced abortion as an option, and now understand that abortion should not be an available [sic] for women. They all agree that abortion only complicated their lives, even though many chose life.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Vote Yes For Life, "About Us," <http://www.voteyesforlife.com/about.asp> (accessed on 3/30/08).

In the Vote Yes For Life campaign, there is no discussion of government, families or neighbors pitted against one another. Instead, through a wide variety of women's stories, abortion is framed as a woman's issue. This blurb mentions women that made a variety of decisions in regards to their unwanted pregnancy; only one of five women chose abortion, yet all of their experiences are utilized to argue for the benefit of outlawing abortion. These women's stories emerge on this website, in campaign promotional materials and in campaign commercials. The campaign actually makes these women's stories so central to their campaign that women's experiences are present even when they are not explicitly being discussed.

Consider the campaign promotional materials, in which four blonde, white, very mid-western-looking women are put into a square box, with each woman's face making up a quarter of that box. These photos are of women that have shared their stories publicly as part of the campaign, and are recognizable as the faces on flyers at rallies, on banners, in commercials and on promotional videos. Together these photos comprise a box of women's experiences, which is present in the background at press conferences, during interviews with the media, and even when the women are being videotaped sharing their stories—in short, the photographs that represent women's experiences are utilized in every part of the campaign, regardless of whether or not women are actually sharing their experiences at that moment. This is nowhere more obvious than on the Vote Yes For Life website.

Mainstream Media—News Coverage and Commercials

The pro-privacy, anti-government intrusion, pro-family and health rhetorics that characterize the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families website are also evident in the way they frame their messages that appear in the mainstream media. But there is a slight twist, as the woman seeking abortion as a victim of rape or incest emerges frequently within campaign commercials, press conferences and, to a lesser extent, news interviews. In these media, the campaign claims that this ban punishes the victim. Although women finally emerge in the discourse of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, they are portrayed in one capacity: victim.

Campaign Commercials

Within campaign commercials specifically, the rhetorics of anti-government intrusion, woman as rape or incest victim, and health dominate.

South Dakotans agree: honor and protect human life. Reduce the number of abortions. But should a woman who is the victim of rape or incest be left with no option? What about the mother whose health would be seriously threatened? Referred law 6 makes no exceptions for these tragic circumstances. Government would decide, not these women and their doctors. It just goes too far. Vote No on Referred Law 6.¹⁴⁷

In this thirty-second commercial, the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families frames abortion as something negative that should be reduced, but that certain women should be exempt from these restrictions. The commercial creates this message by incorporating the issue of mother's (rather than women's) health. Importantly, the

¹⁴⁷ South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, Campaign Commercial, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veLWnAyhHGM> (accessed 4/17/08).

commercial ends with the image of a distraught white, heterosexual couple talking with a doctor in his office. Through this final illustration, the government is framed as making private decisions that would otherwise be made between a woman, her spouse and their (family) doctor. Importantly, no abortion narratives are used within the commercials or mainstream media hits linked to the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families.

While the abortion-rights campaign framed their most public arguments within a pro-privacy, pro-family, pro-health, anti-government intrusion rhetoric, the Vote Yes For Life campaign commercials both responded to the arguments of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families and also framed abortion as a woman's issue. The images of the same four white, blonde women discussed earlier are present both within some campaign commercials and also some mainstream media hits. When the stories or photos of these women are not included, the campaign commercials seem more focused on responding to criticisms of the "no exceptions" policy included in the South Dakota abortion ban. And in many cases, the campaign utilizes the images of women in order to make arguments regarding rape. Consider the following text from a Vote Yes for Life campaign commercial:

Before you vote on referred law six, please get the facts. Referred law 6 does not change the fact the women can still use the morning after pill. Victims of rape and incest can still access the best options for medical care, compassion and justice. And this can include the morning after pill. But referred law 6 ends abortion as birth control. The fact is rape doesn't have to end in pregnancy. Women have options in referred law 6. Vote Yes on 6.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Vote Yes For Life, Campaign Commercial, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtYz31biOMw> (accessed on 4/17/08).

In this commercial, photographs of women's faces pop up on the screen and are accompanied by words that reflect what the campaign sees as the central points in the above text: "Referred Law Six" "Still Access Best Options," "Morning After Pill," "Ends Abortion as Birth Control," "Rape Doesn't Have to End in Pregnancy" and "Women Have Options in Referred Law 6." The photos of women are accompanied by video footage, though the women in the videos are only blinking, nodding or smiling, rather than speaking. Each of the women in the videos and many of the women in the photographs on this commercial are identifiable as the women whose stories have been utilized by this campaign. While the intent of this commercial seems to be to respond to the critiques made by abortion-rights advocates, who argue that this ban is too restrictive as it does not make exceptions for rape, incest or health of the mother, the Vote Yes For Life campaign does so by invoking the faces of women who have shared their personal crisis pregnancy narratives publicly. Interestingly, none of the women shared stories of being raped, yet the campaign still does not shy away from using their stories of crisis pregnancies to both frame abortion as a woman's issue and to respond to critiques of the "No Exceptions" policy of the campaign.

A second campaign commercial invokes the authority of doctors in order to argue that the ban does make adequate exceptions for victims of rape, incest and in cases where the woman's life or health is in danger:

We're all doctors here in South Dakota. Science now proves that life begins at conception. Over 96% of abortions performed in South Dakota are for birth control. Referred law six addresses these situations. This measure does provide exception for the life and the health of the mother. And the morning after pill may be taken in any event, including sexual assault or incest. Referred law six is a caring approach to protecting

women and limiting abortion performed as birth control in South Dakota. Abortion stops a beating heart. Vote yes on referred law six.¹⁴⁹

In this particular commercial, all of the doctors are wearing white lab coats, all of them are white and most are men. The structure of the commercial is interesting as various doctors speak, breaking up individual sentences into clauses where multiple people's voices come together to form one complete thought. The last two sentences are spoken in unison, creating the feeling that all of South Dakota's doctors are represented here. While the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families frames both doctors and women as victims of government intrusion, the Vote Yes For Life campaign incorporates the images of doctors to suggest that women are being protected by this initiative.

News Coverage

By looking to mainstream media coverage of election night, further discursive differences in the campaigns become evident. Consider the "Vote No On 6" press conference following the announcement that South Dakota voters overturned the state-wide abortion ban. Against a backdrop of several red, white and blue "Vote No On 6" signs and red, white and blue balloons, a fairly non-descript, middle-aged white man in a navy suit and red tie announces,

Today South Dakota sent a strong message to Governor Rounds and to our legislature, to the rest of the United States and really to the whole world. Here in South Dakota we are not going to stand for government intrusion into the personal lives..."

¹⁴⁹ Vote Yes For Life, Campaign Commercial, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtYz31biOMw> (accessed on 4/17/08).

And the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families continues to frame abortion in terms of government intrusion and privacy. Even on the night of this campaign victory, abortion is not connected to women. Furthermore, the man sending this important message on behalf of the campaign, who happens to be a doctor from Rapid City, South Dakota, seems like a regular, nice, mainstream South Dakotan. He is not overly excited. His language is very controlled. He does not smile too much. Remember, this is the campaign that won.¹⁵⁰

Consider the live election night interview on Kelo-Land TV with Leslee Unruh, Executive Director of Vote Yes For Life, founder and director of a crisis pregnancy center in South Dakota, and founder of the Fleet for Little Feet, a mobile crisis pregnancy center. Before going to the live interview with Leslee Unruh, the Kelo-Land anchor states, “There is no disappointment, at least not that we understand, from the Vote Yes campaign....I know they want the vote to go their way, but are they accepting the reality now that, perhaps, they’re not going to succeed?” Reporter Kelly Graham states, “Doug, I hope I heard you right but they are not accepting reality, if that’s what you asked... Leslee, tell me, the AP is saying that Vote No is the winner. What do you have to say about that?”

Leslee Unruh, smiling widely, responds excitedly:

They are never gonna win! We are never gonna quit—ever, ever ever. We’re not gonna give up. We are in this. We are not conceding. I’m never conceding. None of these people are conceding. They have got a fight like they have never seen. We have an army of people here. And not just

¹⁵⁰ South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, Press Conference. 11/7/06. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYIhGVrZpi8> (accessed 4/17/08).

here—but all over this nation. We have hope in this nation. There are people in West Virginia here and they are gonna put this same bill in their legislature, Planned Parenthood. There are people in Texas here and they are gonna put this same bill in their legislature. And there are men like Roger Hunt and Matt McCulley that have championed women, and there is a new day coming! Women are being heard all over this nation and it started right here in South Dakota.

The reporter follows up with a question about the volunteers on the campaign. Again, with a great amount of passion, energy and excitement, Unruh responds:

Well, every single day that I walked in here I saw one man that quit his job in Washington D.C. as a lawyer and came here and he was here every day, that's Guave. There was another man in a wheelchair, his name is Patrick and he was here and he was on those phones every day. And there another man, his name was James and he was a blind man, and he was here everyday. And there are wonderful people here. There are women here that have had abortions. I have a woman that walked in five minutes ago. And she said, 'For the first time in my life I feel free. Because I finally have told my story, I don't have to live in shame anymore.' We are not gonna live in shame. We are gonna tell our stories. And we are gonna keep telling our stories until we are not dismissed in this country. Because we are now the majority, Planned Parenthood, we the women who you have killed our children. We are the majority.

The reporter asks about the future of the campaign and implies that Unruh previously articulated that other states should not be discouraged from initiating a similar campaign.

Unruh responds, shaking her head “No” in agreement.

We've been winning every day, every single day of this campaign we've been winning. Ya know, there was a lawsuit that was filed that is called informed consent. And Planned Parenthood... does not even want to inform women. They filed a lawsuit against the state of South Dakota. So you know you can play games and constantly talk about provisions and exceptions and play all those word games, but ya know what—It comes down to one thing: dead baby is very very bad, live baby is very very good.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ News coverage, Kelo-Land TV. 11/7/06. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB6GyFspFe8> (accessed on 4/17/08).

Unruh uses second-hand narratives in order to give credence to the Vote Yes For Life campaign. She describes individuals who have worked on the campaign. She tells the story of a woman's negative experience with abortion. She also mentions championing women, informing women, and that women who have had their children killed are the majority. While I would definitely not characterize this as feminist rhetoric, it is much more woman-centered and personalized than the discourses used by the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families.

Furthermore, unlike the press conference held by the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, in which one man spoke eloquently but not excitedly about the win, Unruh is full of passion, her voice full of inflection, her face smiling continuously. Each of her sentences could have ended with an exclamation point, rather than a period in the above text. Behind her, people cheer at appropriate times during the interview and wave signs wildly. If one was watching the news coverage of these two campaigns on election night with the sound off, it would undoubtedly appear that the Vote Yes For Life campaign had won this battle.

Rallies

By looking specifically at the signs used at abortion-rights rallies surrounding the South Dakota campaign it becomes clear that advocates for reproductive justice utilize a more feminist rhetoric and woman-centered approach here than in any other area of the campaign. It would be easy to reduce this feminist language to individual actions and

initiative, however, I challenge this on three accounts: At Planned Parenthood-sponsored rallies in thirty-three states across the country in March of 2006, supporters held signs that screamed “SUPPORT THE WOMEN OF SOUTH DAKOTA”; an organization printed professional signs for rallies held in South Dakota that read simply “South Dakota” where the “D” of Dakota was a coat hanger on its side¹⁵²; the feminist language decorating individual homemade signs at protests and rallies held in South Dakota appeared repeatedly, while this discourse was not evident in other areas of the campaign, suggesting that the individuals rallying understood that this particular woman-centered ideology would be welcome at the protests, while it may not be valued in other areas of the campaign.

While it may not seem that the phrases listed above—those suggesting the need to support women, those connecting the South Dakota ban to coat-hanger abortions, and the “Keep the Government Out of My Uterus” type slogans typical of abortion-rights rallies—are all that feminist in nature, this is still a radically different discourse than used elsewhere in this campaign. Furthermore, this discourse centers women and makes abortion a woman’s issue more than anywhere else in the strategies used by the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families.

At this point it should not be surprising that the Vote Yes For Life campaign utilizes women’s narratives and experiences at their rallies as well. Whether this includes women sharing their tear-filled abortion stories via a bullhorn or holding up signs that say

¹⁵² I’ve not been able to locate the organization (or individual) that had these signs printed. However, because the signs re-appear in photos of rallies across the state, I believe it is safe to assume that these signs were printed by an organization and thus represent a rhetoric that is more feminist in nature at an organizational level.

“I Regret My Abortion,” the anti-abortion rallies and protests in South Dakota utilize language that is similar to the rhetoric of the rest of the campaign. In other words, the Vote Yes For Life campaign incorporates women’s negative experiences with abortion and crisis pregnancies into all aspects of their campaign, including their website, commercials, in interviews appearing on the news or in the newspaper, and at rallies held across the state.

What does this description of the discourses surrounding the South Dakota abortion ban suggest? On the most basic level, this description offers a look at the various discourses and strategies used both within a particular campaign and between two different campaigns. In conjunction with the discussion I offered on the patterns in rhetorical strategies used by mainstream reproductive rights organizations from 1969-early 2000’s, the South Dakota campaign highlights the ways in which discourses dominant at various points in history continue to emerge within contemporary campaigns. For example, the most public messages created by the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families utilize the pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government intrusion rhetoric dominant in 1980’s discourses of mainstream reproductive rights organizations. In campaign commercials, and to a lesser extent in press conferences, the abortion-rights campaign—in addition to framing their message within pro-privacy, pro-family, anti-government intrusion rhetoric—invokes the image of the innocent rape victim, deploying the rhetoric of victimization and innocence that emerged and dominated 1990’s discussions of abortion rights. Within the rallies and protests both within South Dakota

and across the country, a more feminist and woman-centered rhetoric is evident, mimicking the language used throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

Most importantly, the South Dakota campaign substantiates my previous claims regarding the current uses of abortion narratives by anti-abortion and abortion-rights organizations: anti-abortion organizations and campaigns are utilizing narratives and personal experience in ways that abortion-rights groups are not. In the case of the 2006 South Dakota abortion ban, the Vote Yes For Life campaign frames their messages within a woman-centered rhetoric, making women's narratives central to every part of their strategy. As stated, the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families neither discusses abortion as it relates to women nor utilizes personal narratives in their attempt to defend abortion rights. It appears, then, that rhetorics framing abortion as a woman's issue—regardless of the ideology behind that rhetoric—create a space where women's stories are shared and valued.

Cecilia Fire Thunder and Native Voices

While this discussion has focused on the discourses used by the two dominant South Dakota campaigns working for and against the abortion ban, this limited analysis should not suggest that these were the only discourses in play in South Dakota or across the country. Cecilia Fire Thunder, the President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe at the time of the abortion ban, was a visible and vocal member of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families. But despite this connection, the rhetoric she used publicly to oppose the ban differed greatly from the discourses utilized by the abortion-rights campaign.

These different rhetorics are especially interesting considering the close connections between Native communities and the abortion ban: the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families sponsored Get Out The Vote activities on reservations in South Dakota; Cecilia Fire Thunder organized press conferences, was often quoted in South Dakota newspapers, the women's press, the Indigenous press and the mainstream national news; and Native communities, particularly Native women, from across the country actively discussed the South Dakota abortion ban and Fire Thunder's commitment to abortion rights in the blogosphere.

While Native women across the country were blogging about the abortion ban, many Indigenous South Dakotans found themselves at the center of the public debate over the 2006 abortion ban. Making up 8% of South Dakota's total population, Native people developed a less dominant but still visible discourse that does not reflect the dominant discourses described earlier. These discourses and the actions that emerged from them had far-reaching impacts. For example, Cecilia Fire Thunder, the first woman President of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, publicly asserted that if the abortion ban held in South Dakota, she would open an abortion clinic on the Pine Ridge reservation. Of course, because reservations are sovereign nations, South Dakota's state laws would have no jurisdiction there. Fire Thunder was subsequently impeached for soliciting donations for a clinic that had not yet been approved by the Tribal Council. Fire Thunder denies these allegations, stating that people from around the country heard about her plan to open a clinic and sent money on their own. Furthermore, all of the checks and monies were returned to the individuals, who were urged to donate the money to an off-

reservation non-profit organization that hopes to establish a women's health clinic in western South Dakota.

In actuality, the Council had previously suspended Fire Thunder three times and had also attempted, unsuccessfully, to impeach her. Fire Thunder's strong statements in support of abortion rights provided enough outcry and discontent both on the reservation and off for the Council to finally succeed in impeaching her. At the same Council meeting where Fire Thunder was impeached, the tribe went on to pass an even more restrictive ban on abortion than the state of South Dakota had: According to the ban, the tribe would "banish from the reservation anyone who considers getting an abortion or helps someone else obtain one."¹⁵³

Native women bloggers responded to this ban outraged, using rhetoric that differs greatly from the dominant discourses of mainstream reproductive rights organizations.

Consider Jacqueline Keeler's post on her feminist Native blog titled TiyospayeNow:

We cannot as modern Lakota/Dakota/Nakota or even Dine or American women be constrained by [traditions]. We can be informed by them, even inspired, but we must make decisions for our bodies, our future, our well-being that are sensible and that show that we value ourselves. We, as women, are more than our biology, we are more than just baby machines for a Lakota Nation, a Dakota Nation, or a Nakota Nation. We are productive members of society, we are the ones earning the college degrees, holding the jobs and are the ones by and large, that must raise the children, earn wages to buy them shoes and pay for their futures. We must be the ones to be able to make these choices concerning our bodies.

Keeler clearly frames abortion as a woman's issue and also connects the issue of abortion to broader traditional beliefs. To some extent, Keeler's use of language reflects both the

¹⁵³ Briggs, Kara. "Pine Ridge Leader Faces Battle Over Abortion Ban," Women's E-News. 6/27/06 <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm?aid=2793> (accessed on 4/19/08).

rhetoric of dominant feminist discourses used predominantly at abortion-rights rallies—“our bodies,” “more than just baby machines”—and also serves as a response to indigenous people that argue that abortion goes against tradition, is a white woman’s issue, and is a continued form of genocide against Native populations. Keeler continues to discuss traditional Nakota/Dakota/Lakota values in a broad sense:

It may be tradition to do this or that, according to this person or that, but we must look clearly at what future we are dealing our young women when we assign them this lot so early in life.... This is not about killing babies, but about growing strong families that have the resources to take care of each other. If we speak of a tradition that values life, we must also speak of a tradition that valued self-control. Lakota/Dakota/Nakota men were taught to control their sexual drive. Traditionally, a man was not a man unless he could control himself. A couple that had children closer than four years apart faced deep shame in the community. It was regarded and called “killing the child”. Children were supposed to be spaced four years apart, any less and you endangered the older child. It was a shame that stayed with the “killed child” for the rest of their lives. People who knew would look upon that child with pity. Even in old age it would be remembered how the parents had disrespected their elder child.

So, when we talk about tradition, we must realize that it cannot work in bits and pieces. And that even if wholly intact, it may not work at all today. If women must not commit abortion, then Lakota men on the reservation must practice this traditional form of manhood and have strict control of their sexual drive. The reason women on the reservation face some of the highest rates of rape and incest in the country is because men, obviously, do not practice this. One gender cannot pay the price for a broken society. And we cannot ignore the real price women pay and that children pay raised in difficult circumstances. Raising children is no small feat. And periods of pregnancy and childbirth mark periods of the greatest economic stress for families in the United States on or off the reservation. Expectant parents in the United States are more likely to slide below the poverty level. Women in the workforce, educated or not, are more likely to face negative job performance reviews when they are pregnant. Society punishes women for veering from the male norm.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Keeler, Jacqueline. “Fire Thunder Impeachment and the Rights of Women,” TiyospayeNow Blog

Keeler works to connect abortion with traditional values, poverty and sexual assault in a framework informed by a belief in the systemic nature of racism and sexism. Although this particular article posted on her blog was written in response to Cecilia Fire Thunder's impeachment, Keeler clearly does not privilege abortion above other issues that Native women face, but actually uses the debate around abortion to raise these issues and discuss their inter-related nature.

Similarly, Kim TallBear, Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at ASU responds to a blog post by challenging the applicability of the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" to those living in Indian Country, addressing the complex nature of the debate, and offering new ways to think about abortion outside of the dominant binary:

For those of us who do not subscribe to certain Christian doctrinal teachings, but who do subscribe to cultural imperatives about the sacredness of life, our moral and political response to terminating a pregnancy is not captured by either of the most vocal positions in the American abortion wars: the "pro-choice" and "pro-life" positions.

My Dakota mother and great-grandmother, for example, did not let me forget the powerful potential of my body to bear children. I was taught that a child is sacred, and that an unwanted pregnancy was to be assiduously avoided through safe-sex practices and, when I was younger, through abstinence.

My mother and great-grandmother never used the words "choice" or "rights," but rather they spoke of "power" and "responsibility." But my mother and great-grandmother also took a leap of faith that I would have the space to be responsible for my body - that I would not, for example, face rape.

At the same time, I was raised with a politicized understanding of the world. Both women and men in my family and in our tribe endured their share of hardship, including sexual violence. I grew to understand that within a colonial context. Abortion, in that context, might be considered a sad but necessary decision.

We differed from the "pro-choice" position in that we spoke of this and all reproductive decisions not as a "right" or a "choice," but as a responsibility that grew out of the power in women's bodies. We differed from the "pro-life" position in that we recognized that the decision could be shaped by the hardship and violence that haunt Indian people to this day. Our views about the sacred nature of the unborn child were not synonymous with fundamentalist Christian views. From my upbringing, I came to understand abortion as a difficult topic with only context-specific and imperfect solutions.

Both essays shared above highlight the differences in the ways that Native bloggers frame abortion in relation to the dominant discourses used by mainstream reproductive rights campaigns and organizations. However, despite the tensions that many Native bloggers acknowledge, they overwhelmingly support Cecilia Fire Thunder's public opposition to South Dakota's ban. Even TallBear's essay, which is more critical than most posts, supports Fire Thunder's leadership.

David Melmer's April 2006 Indian Country Today article ["Oglala president takes center stage on women's clinic," Vol. 25, Iss. 43] noted that Fire Thunder brings "traditional cultural attitudes to the forefront of the debate." But Fire Thunder can't do that alone. I hope that we in Indian country will use Fire Thunder's leadership as a starting point for thoughtful discussion. How can our cultural and spiritual perspectives inform our response to the pressing issues of abortion, rape and the need for responsible family planning by both men and women?

American Indian tribes need to maintain a sensitive balance. We must exercise political sovereignty by rejecting efforts by mostly white, male lawmakers to exercise regulatory authority as if we are not here.

On the other side, we need to be careful that our particular cultural perspectives are not represented shallowly in support of a largely non-

Native political agenda that does not necessarily respond to the priorities and values of Indian country.¹⁵⁵

The responses posted on blogs by Native women are overwhelmingly supportive of both Fire Thunder's public stand and also abortion rights, though Native women rarely frame this support within the discourses evident elsewhere. Consider the following post, which I would argue reflects feminist values, but does not necessarily reflect dominant feminist discourses:

Cecelia, When a Lakota woman loses this type of decision to a Lakota man(?) is that man truly Lakota? This is a prime example of colonialism at it's [sic] worst. The christian mentality has taken it's [sic] negative grasp upon our people in that Lakota women are now looked upon as objects of ownership.

150 years ago, we were true Lakota, no drug & alcohol inflicted social problems such as rape and incest existed. We didn't need to address abortion in such a public way as we did have our medicine to deal with such a preganancy [sic]. Offenders were dealt with harshly, banishment or death for such a crime.

I admire Cecelia for attempting to deal with the reality of our situations on the Rez. by offering women and young girls an opportunity to make that choice with their own bodies [sic].¹⁵⁶

The Lakota woman posting this response clearly does not utilize the pro-privacy, pro-family, pro-health and anti-government intrusion rhetorics of the dominant South Dakota abortion rights campaign. Abortion is not framed as an issue to be decided solely within one's nuclear family or with one's current sexual partner and is not framed in terms of

¹⁵⁵ Tall Bear, Kim. Comment on "Cecilia Fire Thunder and the Oglala Sioux Women's Quiet Revolution: Sexual Abuse, Domestic Violence, Women's Sovereignty" Women's Space, 6/30/06. <http://womensspace.wordpress.com/2006/06/30/cecilia-fire-thunder-sexual-abuse-and-domestic-violence-womens-sovereignty/> (accessed on 4/19/08).

¹⁵⁶ Tankshi TA. Comment on "Cecilia Fire Thunder Impeached." Women's Space, 6/30/06. <http://womensspace.wordpress.com/2006/06/30/cecilia-fire-thunder-impeached/> (accessed on 4/19/08.)

families' or women's health. Instead she frames her support of abortion rights within an understanding of colonialism, negative impacts of Christianity on Native communities and the use of traditional medicines to deal with unwanted pregnancies.

Likewise, Cecilia Fire Thunder and Charon Asetoyer, another prominent South Dakotan feminist Native rights activist, use a discourse not evident elsewhere in the South Dakota campaign. Again, no pro-family, pro-privacy rhetoric is deployed. Instead, like the bloggers discussed previously, they seem to frame abortion within discussions of tradition, oppression and history. This is particularly interesting when Fire Thunder and Asetoyer speak to the mainstream press or a white audience—either at a press conference or at a feminist gathering. At a press conference in Rapid City, SD, Cecilia Fire Thunder speaks about abortion rights in terms of religious freedom and assaults on the constitution. Fire Thunder is a passionate and intense speaker, and unlike the very subdued public faces of the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, Fire Thunder does not contain her emotions or make her beliefs more palatable to those receiving her messages via mainstream media.

The very reasons all of the white people that are standing here holding their signs and all the white people in America, the reason you are here and you have to go back less than 300 hundred years ago [sic]. You were pitiful, weren't you? You didn't have no place to go [sic]. You didn't have a pot to piss in because you were running away from religious persecution. And you came to America to be able to practice freely— how to believe, how to live. What is Freedom?!? ...

You don't infringe upon my right to speak up for what I believe in. I did not come to your rallies. I did not come to your gatherings and hold up my

signs because I respected you and your beliefs. And you are not respecting me at all.¹⁵⁷

At this particular conference, a handful of white anti-abortion activists hold signs that read: "Children are Sacred. Vote Yes For Life on 6." Fire Thunder responds to these white activists by connecting what she sees as their infringement on this event to the infringement of Christians on Indigenous people and on public policy. She further implies that banning abortion is a disrespectful infringement on her religious and cultural beliefs.

Charon Asetoyer also speaks to a predominantly white audience, though her speech takes place outside of South Dakota. At the 2007 National NOW conference, Asetoyer discusses her campaign for state legislator, which she claims was a response to the abortion ban.

Never did we ever as an indigenous woman [sic] did I ever have to face a government who would decide for me what I could and could not do with my body. Because in our culture the matters of women are left up to women...and they are not thrust out into the political arena for political and public scrutinization.....¹⁵⁸

Asetoyer clearly defines abortion as a woman's issue and does not see public debate around abortion as complementary to traditional Indigenous practices. In an article posted at Women's E-News, Asetoyer responds to the suggestion for public discussion by one of the male members of the almost-all male Tribal Council that impeached Fire Thunder. "These matters are not up for scrutiny by our male counterparts," she said.

¹⁵⁷ Fire Thunder, Cecilia. Press Conference in Rapid City, SD.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgjQMKlZXHk> (accessed on 4/17/08).

¹⁵⁸ Asetoyer, Charon. Keynote speech, 2007 National NOW Conference.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA4oAdjFzMs> (accessed on 4/17/08).

"This is a discussion for women to have in privacy of other women. Whoever calls for public debates has been totally converted to a colonial way of thinking." Like Fire Thunder and the Native women bloggers, Asetoyer also discusses abortion within a framework that highlights women and traditional indigenous practices. And further, these women do this through challenging not only dominant majoritarian culture that banned abortion at the state level, but also through challenging the dominant discourses and power of Native men on their reservations.

Perhaps most interestingly for the purposes of connecting the use of abortion narratives to various discursive systems and strategies, it appears that Native women utilize narratives in their support of abortion rights—but that these stories are not the same types of narratives being used by mainstream organizations and supporters of abortion rights. In other words, Native women will defend abortion rights by sharing the stories of their own lives, the stories of their family members and the stories of their traditions. Yet, I did not locate a single story of a Native woman discussing her individual abortion experience. Consider as an example the excerpt of Tall Bear's blog post shared above. Tall Bear discusses her opinions on abortion within a narrative framework that centralizes her family and her traditions, rather than her personal connections to an abortion experience, but importantly her experience is still shared as a personal narrative.

Tall Bear states:

My Dakota mother and great-grandmother, for example, did not let me forget the powerful potential of my body to bear children. I was taught that a child is sacred, and that an unwanted pregnancy was to be assiduously avoided through safe-sex practices and, when I was younger, through abstinence.

My mother and great-grandmother never used the words “choice” or “rights,” but rather they spoke of “power” and “responsibility.” But my mother and great-grandmother also took a leap of faith that I would have the space to be responsible for my body - that I would not, for example, face rape.

At the same time, I was raised with a politicized understanding of the world. Both women and men in my family and in our tribe endured their share of hardship, including sexual violence. I grew to understand that within a colonial context. Abortion, in that context, might be considered a sad but necessary decision.¹⁵⁹

Tall Bear discusses the teachings that were handed down to her through her mother and great-grandmother, speaking in the first-person to tell her story. She shares the experiences of her family members, mentioning the sexual violence many of them faced. This example alone captures the differences in the content of the narratives that Native women share in comparison to the content of the first-person abortion narratives discussed throughout this rest of this work, marking an important discursive difference in the various narratives that are being used as a method for defending abortion rights—even if this is on an individual (rather than an organizational or institutional) level.

Cecilia Fire Thunder was closely aligned with the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families but clearly did not restrict herself to the discourses utilized by the campaign. Other Native women—such as Charon Asetoyer and the Native bloggers—also utilized a discourse not evident in other public articulations of support for abortion. Though there are many possible reasons for this evident distinction between the rhetorics of the dominant abortion-rights campaign and the alternative discourses offered by

¹⁵⁹ Tall Bear, Kim. Comment on “Cecilia Fire Thunder and the Oglala Sioux Women’s Quiet Revolution: Sexual Abuse, Domestic Violence, Women’s Sovereignty” *Women’s Space*, 6/30/06. <http://womensspace.wordpress.com/2006/06/30/cecilia-fire-thunder-sexual-abuse-and-domestic-violence-womens-sovereignty/> (accessed on 4/19/08).

Indigenous supporters of abortion rights, it seems likely that Native people in South Dakota and across the country refuse to separate out abortion rights from sterilization abuse, colonialism and the loss of their languages, lands and cultures, the use of unsafe contraceptives (such as Depo Provera or Norplant) on Native women, violence, poverty and the many other problems that afflict people in Indian Country.

In *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* Andrea Smith clearly outlines the connections between abortion rights, sterilization abuse and the pushing of unsafe contraceptives onto Native women, arguing that by controlling women's access to abortion, the Indian Health Service (the health care provider for most Native women) subsequently forces women to "choose" between sterilization or unsafe contraceptives. Smith clearly articulates the ways in which racism, poverty, colonialism and detrimental federal policies create this situation where Native women have less access to reproductive health care, arguing, "The attacks on the reproductive rights of Native women are frontline strategies in the continuing wars against Native nations."¹⁶⁰ By comparing the discourses used by both Indigenous people and the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families, it is clear that Native women—in South Dakota and across the country—understand the deep connections between abortion rights, colonialism and racism, and the many other reproductive health concerns of their communities.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, Andrea. "Better Dead Than Pregnant': The Colonization of Native Women's Reproductive Health," *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, South End Press: 2005) 106.

Yet, organizations for racial justice, communities of color and mainstream reproductive rights organizations continue to ignore these interwoven concerns of Native women, which clearly impacts the discourses these groups utilize in their discussions of (and positions on) reproductive rights. This example of the alternative abortion-rights discourses Native women utilized in their fight against South Dakota's abortion ban highlights the ways in which alternative abortion-rights discourses are largely being ignored by mainstream reproductive rights organizations and campaigns, but it may also offer a kernel of hope for those of us that are concerned with the strategies of major reproductive rights organizations: an expanded abortion rights discourse is possible, necessary and may be coming soon to a community near you!

CONCLUSION

This thesis seeks to contribute a more thorough historical and contemporary understanding of abortion narratives than was previously available within either academic literature or activist discussions. By analyzing the content of various types of abortion narratives, documenting the emergence of these narratives over the past 40 years, and considering the utilization of abortion narratives for political purposes, I hope I have made several things clear: 1.) current academic analyses of abortion narratives tend to focus on the “collectivity” among the narratives and also urge women to share their stories, arguing for the liberatory potential of this strategy without acknowledging the ways in which abortion narratives have been used in varying capacities by both reproductive rights organizations and individual activists since 1969; 2.) by considering overlap and shifts in the themes present within and across three sets of narratives—abortion-rights narratives on pre-*Roe* illegal abortions, abortion-rights narratives on legal abortions, and anti-abortion narratives—that have never before, to my knowledge, been analyzed in relation to one another, it is possible to see that various forces—such as the historical moment in which the abortion was obtained or remembered, as well as political ideologies—shape the form and content of the stories; 3.) narrative accounts of abortion experiences (either online or in print) have emerged at distinct periods in history, and 4.) the emergence of abortion narratives is connected to broader rhetorical moves within both the abortion-rights and anti-abortion movements; 5.) the discourses dominant within mainstream reproductive rights organizations at various points in history continue to emerge within contemporary debates and campaigns.

Unfortunately, these realizations have only raised broader issues, concerns and questions that must be addressed in future research, such as: Do the themes that I've identified in the narratives emerge in other contemporary representations of abortion—films, letters to the editor, legislative debates, court documents? How are the discourses evident in the narratives shaped by the positionality of the speaker? Are there ways to utilize abortion narratives and women's experiences in ways that don't depend on victimizing rhetoric? What would this look like? How can reproductive rights organizations both utilize a political strategy that seeks to protect and gain rights and also value women's experiences that don't fit within this rhetorical framework? How is the idea that women who have abortions have something to "speak-out" about inherently problematic? Is it possible to overcome this within a personal narrative? How are narratives used within less dominant discourses?

While each of these questions speaks to the limits of this work, the last question raises an especially important point: although this thesis has focused on dominant discourses utilized both within campaigns and mainstream reproductive rights organizations, there were, of course, other less dominant discourses circulating simultaneously, as shown in the discussion of Native discourses in Chapter Three. In the case of the South Dakota campaign, Native politicians, spiritual leaders and bloggers created less visible but still present discourses, which greatly shaped the course of political events and the discourses used to describe those events. While I have conducted some research on the rhetorical responses offered by Native South Dakotans to the state-wide abortion ban, future work must further consider the impact of subaltern discourses,

the ways in which the strategies of less visible discourses are simultaneously different from and similar to dominant discourses, and the role these alternative discourses can play in developing an expanded abortion-rights discourse. In other words, future research must further assess the relationship between various subaltern discourses and dominant discourses in order to understand how these subaltern discourses shaped, responded to, and were impacted by dominant rhetorics. Focusing almost solely on dominant discourses may be the greatest weakness of this thesis, as this strategy clearly avoids the contributions of the most marginalized voices. On the other hand, in order to truly understand what subaltern discourses were working toward and against, it would first be necessary to understand the dominant discourses and strategies in play at that time. Analyzing the content, emergence and utilization of abortion narratives within an alternative discursive framework may provide a greater analytical depth to the arguments outlined within this thesis.

Looking at the continuities and shifts in discourses and strategies within one particular campaign in one particular geographic area over a certain period of time may also be able to provide a greater understanding of the connections between various discourses and the utilization and emergence of narratives. The following section offers a preliminary comparison—restricted by both the space of this thesis and the newness and timing of the 2008 campaign—of aspects of the 2008 Vote Yes For Life campaign with the strategies present in the 2006 battles in support of and opposition to South Dakota’s abortion ban.

2008 Campaign

The 2008 Vote Yes For Life campaign is just taking off. Up until this moment (late May 2008), there has been minimal news coverage of this campaign. No rallies—at least none large or loud enough to gain media attention—have been organized yet. Of course, campaign commercials will not appear until much closer to election day. For these reasons, it is impossible to do an in-depth analysis of the differences and similarities between the 2006 and 2008 anti-abortion or abortion-rights campaigns in South Dakota.

Quite frankly, I would not have even considered comparing the differences between the 2006 and 2008 campaigns had it not been for, what initially appeared as, an unfortunate turn of events: As the due date for my penultimate draft neared, the 2006 Vote Yes For Life campaign website was removed from the internet. Because a part of this thesis analyzes the 2006 Vote Yes For Life website as part of the discourses utilized in the South Dakota campaign, its recent removal from the web immediately forced me into panic mode. The good news is that of the four aspects of the South Dakota campaign I analyze in Chapter Three—websites, rallies, mainstream news coverage and commercials—the only section of this thesis I had finished at the time the website was removed was, luckily, the campaign websites.

While the disappearance of the 2006 website initially freaked me out, I quickly became engrossed in the 2008 Vote Yes For Life campaign website. I watched the videos, checked out all of the links, and looked closely at the photographs posted. In all honesty, I was both frightened and exhilarated by the obvious changes. On the one hand,

I knew almost immediately that, for the integrity of this project, I must discuss these shifts. Yet, with one mere week until the penultimate draft of my thesis was due, I did not feel capable of adding anything more to this project that refuses to stop growing. I certainly did not feel capable of conducting an in-depth analysis comparing the 2006 with the 2008 campaigns. On the other hand, as I worked through the website, I became more and more convinced that the Vote Yes For Life campaign gave me the perfect piece of ammunition to prove one of my largest claims: the use of narratives by campaigns and by reproductive rights organizations is deeply and complexly connected to broader and dominant discursive strategies employed by these same organizations and campaigns.

The shifts in the strategies from the 2006 to 2008 Vote Yes For Life campaigns provide a tangible and convincing example of this point. In the 2006 campaign, women's experiences were central to the campaign, their narratives and images emerging in all aspects of the campaign. By 2008, this is no longer the case. Although the Vote Yes For Life campaign has not changed its mission, as of April 2008, it now has a new face and a new strategy. The considerable shift in the campaign is evident in their website alone: Unlike the 2006 campaign promotional materials, which contained the images of four blonde white women, the 2008 campaign materials are red, white and blue, have an image of Mount Rushmore in the background and state, "The People's Initiative: People of South Dakota Speak." Women are no longer at the heart of this campaign and women's narratives are no longer a central part of their strategy. While South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families never utilized personal experience or narrative as a

political strategy and women's stories were a central part of the 2006 anti-abortion campaign, these stories are evident nowhere in the 2008 battle.

Two themes are prominent in the 2008 anti-abortion campaign that were much less visible in 2006: babies and religion. This is evident on the Vote Yes For Life homepage alone; without scrolling down at all, a website viewer would immediately notice both the five white male clergy under the heading "Featured Endorsements for the Initiative" as well as the revolving photographs of wide-eyed smiling babies and young children. One of the six revolving photos is of a white heterosexual couple, their toddler and (presumably) new baby. Aside from photographs and videos of Leslee Unruh, along with a few photographs of other campaign volunteers, the woman in the photograph of the family is the only noticeable woman on this site. This is drastically different from the 2006 Vote Yes For Life campaign.

While the Vote Yes For Life team is no longer prominently featuring women's experiences, they are still attempting to give a personal face to this campaign. This can be seen in the ways in which they structure their list of supporters. Rather than creating a catalog of bureaucratic agencies, the Vote Yes For Life campaign focuses on the individual supporter. In order to do this, they utilize a photo of the person endorsing the campaign, along with their personal message. Of course, all of the people that are on this list represent an organization. But, significantly, Vote Yes For Life lists the name of the person first and the name of the organization afterwards. For example, the website does not simply list "Priests for Life" as a campaign endorser, but rather names the organization by highlighting its individual leader. In the case of "Priests for Life" this

appears as “Fr. Frank Pavone, National Director, Priests for Life, President, National Pro-life Religious Council, Pastoral Director and Chairman, Rachel's Vineyard.”

The campaign website operated by the SD Campaign for Healthy Families, on the other hand, names their supporters in a bulleted list. No pictures are provided, no personal messages of encouragement, and no individual names listed. While this may initially seem an insignificant point of comparison, I believe this one point speaks to broader trends in the ways that anti-abortion and abortion-rights organizations and campaigns are utilizing personal experience. The SD Campaign for Healthy Families does not appear to use personal narratives or experience at all in their public campaign. On the other hand, the experiences most prominently featured within the Vote Yes For Life campaign changed dramatically. In 2006, women who faced an unwanted crisis pregnancy but chose to parent and, to a lesser extent, woman who regret their abortions were the public face of the campaign. By 2008, these women have been replaced by both babies and the religious leaders who are endorsing the campaign.

This example should also highlight that, aside from the issue of personal experience, the three campaigns—2006 Vote Yes For Life, 2008 Vote Yes For Life and South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families—also differ in the ways they invoke religion. The abortion-rights campaign is nearly silent on the issue of religion, while religion is incorporated more noticeably in the 2008 anti-abortion campaign. This is drastically different from the 2006 anti-abortion campaign. For example, the 2006 Vote Yes For Life campaign homepage makes no reference to religion in the immediate and obvious text. Under the “Get Involved” section, which is one of four tabs on the

campaign homepage, a viewer can click on “Church Resources,” which is one of several links that falls under the “Get Involved” heading. This is the only aspect of the website homepage that suggests any connection between the 2006 Vote Yes for Life campaign and religion. Furthermore, the “Church Resources” link is one of several links under the “Get Involved” heading, which shows that as far as the campaign homepage goes, the campaign suggests utilizing religious resources as one of many ways to get involved, rather than identifying religion as central to their anti-abortion ideology.

However, by 2008 religion dominates the discourse and images on the Vote Yes For Life campaign website. Of the thirty-eight listed supporters, twenty-seven are explicitly religious, containing a word reflective of a religious organization (such as Catholics, Pastoral, Presbyterians, Priests) in the title of the organization represented or displayed prominently in the description of the organization posted on the website. Only eleven of the thirty-eight do not centralize religion in their personal statement of support, though some of these individuals still briefly mention God, religion and praying for South Dakota. By looking at the list of campaign endorsers, it becomes clear that the 2008 Vote Yes For Life campaign is not shying away from utilizing religion in their fight to outlaw abortion. This shift itself is obviously a rhetorical strategy, one that the anti-abortion campaign presumably believes will bring enough South Dakotan voters to vote in support of an abortion ban.

This is in direct contrast to the ways in which religion is being utilized within the abortion-rights campaign. In fact, on the campaign website, religion is not mentioned at all, aside from two minor exceptions. In describing those that make up the SD Campaign

for Healthy Families, the website includes “pastors” as well as a list of other community leaders. Secondly, the bulleted list of supporters includes Pastors for Moral Choices, a coalition of thirty South Dakotan clergy members that came together to oppose the abortion ban. These two minor points reflect all religious references on the campaign website.

While this brief and preliminary discussion of the differences between the 2006 and 2008 campaigns working for and against abortion rights in South Dakota is necessarily incomplete, I believe it highlights an important point: the dominant discourses utilized within a campaign determines whether or not women’s narrative representations of abortion will be considered a valuable political tool within that campaign. When the public image of the Vote Yes For Life campaign was governed by the faces and stories of four women, women’s narrative accounts of experiences with crisis pregnancies were utilized throughout the campaign. When images of Mount Rushmore, babies and clergy replace women as the central features of the campaign, women’s narratives are no longer present. Whether this means that among anti-abortion advocates, women were associated with the defeat of the abortion ban in 2006 or that the campaign simply felt they needed a new face for their next fight is debatable; what is certain is that the discourses and images utilized by the Vote Yes For Life campaign shifted from 2006 to 2008, and in this transition, women’s narratives have disappeared.

Final Thoughts

Though there is quite a lot of feminist writing on abortion, little attention has been paid to the use of narratives—either in a historical context or for political value. I hope that this project both begins to fill that gap and also creates new understandings of the need for more critical reflections on the strategies being used by advocates for reproductive justice.

At this point I should make it clear that I am not advocating for or against using narratives as a strategy for gaining political rights—I am, however, suggesting that we rethink the ways in which abortion narratives have been interpreted as a reflection of truth, a reflection of an experience, and instead view them as a discursive reflection of political ideologies, historical moments and broader social contexts. In other words, I am arguing against reading and utilizing abortion narratives as an accurate and “true” representation of an experience. With this in mind, individual abortion-rights activists and organizations must re-consider the value of using abortion narratives as a visible tool in the public struggle to defend and gain political rights.

Despite my argument that abortion narratives are more a reflection of the discourses surrounding political, ideological and historical systems than an accurate reflection of an individual experience, this should not automatically lead to the interpretation that using abortion narratives is an invaluable activist strategy. Up until this point, narratives have been used precisely for the purpose that I criticize here—to share women’s “real” abortion experiences, as if these experiences are outside of not only the woman’s political ideologies and available discourses, but also outside of the historical

moment in which she experienced the pregnancy. Of course, individual experiences can never be removed from the broader contexts that create the spaces for those experiences to take place.

But does this mean that utilizing narratives as a strategy for gaining rights is inherently flawed? Not if activists are willing to re-think the value of utilizing abortion narratives. To begin to think of narratives outside of the realm of “truth” and more as a political tool for activists—reflective of history, society and political ideologies—could open up new ways to reflect on our activist strategies. In fact, I believe that moving away from viewing narratives as evidence of an experience and toward interpreting these stories as a reflection of discourses, power, politics and history could be incredibly transformative—let us try to view narratives as a *reflection* of our strategies rather than as a political strategy. Because the form, content, emergence and utilization of abortion narratives are direct reflections of broader discursive movements and strategies, the narratives themselves provide abortion-rights advocates with a mirror from which we can critically analyze (the interpretations of) our own actions, discourses and strategies. In accordance with this suggested shift, abortion rights activists could learn a great deal more from narratives than we are currently able to based solely on the ways we interpret these stories.

If abortion rights advocates could conceptualize narratives not as a strategy in and of itself, but rather as a tool with which we can critically self-reflect on our discourses and strategies, this shift could potentially add another form of ammunition to the fight for reproductive justice. In my opinion, we activists often get so caught up in

individual political battles and material struggles that we forget to self-reflect on the impacts of the strategies and discourses we utilize. In this sense, the existence and proliferation of abortion narratives should be viewed as a gift to abortion-rights organizations from women who have experienced an abortion—but, again, not because narratives in support of abortion rights are any more genuine than those that oppose abortion and not because the stories are an apolitical or ahistorical representation of an experience. But because abortion narratives are a reflection of the broader discourses being used to frame abortion and often directly related to the discourses used by reproductive rights organizations and activists, this gift allows us to analyze the impacts (of the reiteration) of the rhetorics we employ. Viewing narratives as a genre worthy of critical analysis, versus simply accepting abortion narratives as a positive strategy for gaining rights, may create a space from which we can think diligently and continuously about the connections between rhetoric, ideologies, politics, narrative representation and reproductive justice.

The differences in existing narratives suggest that the form and content of abortion narratives has shifted over time to reflect changes based in the historical moment in which the abortion was obtained and remembered as well as the ideologies and political goals of the woman sharing her story. This fact alone makes it incredibly difficult to advocate either for or against using abortion narratives for radical or mainstream organizing purposes. In other words, if the content of abortion narratives is historically, politically and socially situated, it is certainly possible that abortion narratives could be intentionally constructed in a way that would allow society to re-think

hegemonic constructions of womanhood. It is also possible that a shift in dominant discourses could naturally create a space where the content of abortion narratives could reflect explicitly feminist, subversive or radical ideologies. But this is not happening now. After reading hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of abortion narratives, I feel like I can argue with certainty that the current function of abortion narratives is not to challenge dominant ideologies, but rather often reflects and re-creates oppressive systems in order to defend the right to legal abortion.

So, perhaps, the point is not to question whether or not abortion narratives could ever be used within a feminist abortion-rights campaign, but to acknowledge both the limits and benefits to utilizing narratives as part of an activist struggle; to think critically about the intersections between discourse, politics, history, ideologies, narrative representation and activist strategies; to question how we can both defend abortion rights in a conservative climate and also refuse to forfeit feminist ideologies and discourses; to consider what the (non)existence of these narratives tells us about the discourses being used by dominant reproductive rights organizations, and the impacts these discourses have on informing broader belief systems; and if, as I suggest, narratives do tell us much more about discursive systems, political ideologies and historical and social moments than they do about women's individual experiences with abortion, then we must re-think our interpretation and utilization of those stories.

This thesis is as much about the ways in which narratives reflect trends in broader discursive systems as it is a critique of the rhetorical strategies currently being used by dominant abortion-rights organizations. Just as I suggest that a critical engagement with

abortion narratives opens up the space to more fully understand the varying consequences of diverse discourses, a critical engagement with the dominant rhetorics of reproductive rights organizations creates a space from which one can rigorously analyze constructions of womanhood. In this sense, many of the questions that I use to analyze abortion narratives can also be used to frame an analysis of the dominant discourses. In other words, we can use similar questions to ask not only “what do these narratives tell us about specific historical moments, discourses and political agendas?” but also “what do these discourses tell us about the current political moment we are in, the strategies being used to preserve rights, and constructions of what it means to be a woman?”

While I do not believe that it is possible to use existing abortion narratives to challenge hegemonic ideologies at this particular time, or that mainstream abortion-rights organizations are utilizing discourses that allow narratives to emerge, I do believe we can learn a great deal about discursive systems, political ideologies, history and social movements by looking more closely at abortion narratives. I also believe that potential for expanded avenues toward reproductive justice lie with our ability to create woman-centered discourses. I am not suggesting a shift to “woman-centered” discourses in order to pin down specific organizing tactics that could fall within this definition, but rather propose a deliberate shift in discourses as a way to question and understand the contexts that allow certain activist strategies to become viable. A shift to a woman-centered discourse would not only re-gender the abortion debate, but would actually create a discursive and ideological framework from which we would work to acknowledge how our strategies impact, reiterate or challenge hegemonic ideals (of womanhood) before

utilizing them. A second way to view what a “woman-centered” discourse could offer surrounds thinking about what these narratives (and any broader strategies) both say and do not say about women—rather than specifically about abortion. Whose ideologies are reflected in these narratives? What ideas are being re-iterated and what systems are being challenged? What version of womanhood is being perpetuated? What discourses do we use to project these images? Who does this benefit and who is re-marginalized through these projections? Perhaps by using abortion narratives to reflect on the discourses and strategies of mainstream reproductive rights organizations (rather than as a strategy in itself), we could move toward creating a more woman-centered discourse.

Academics and activists alike could benefit from further research on abortion narratives. Re-framing the value of using abortion narratives is only one miniscule step in creating an expanded abortion-rights discourse that reflects feminist ideologies and also protects political rights. Mainstream reproductive rights organizations use the discourses available to them to protect the right to legal abortion, fighting to create a more equitable world by making abortion-rights palatable to a society that does not care to think about the ways that lack of access to abortion reflects institutionalized oppressions. This work is important and daunting. But if the goal is to create a more feminist and equitable world, protecting abortion rights by any means necessary is simply not enough. With this in mind, leftist feminists must continue to not only challenge anti-abortion advocates (along with our allies in the mainstream abortion-rights movement) but must also confront dominant abortion-rights organizations that frame the battle for reproductive

justice within discourses hardly recognizable to those of us who believe in the possibility of a revolution.

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