"I IMAGINE SHE CONSIDERS HERSELF PRO-CHOICE": REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, REPRODUCTIVE FUTURISM, AND RHETORICAL REPRESENTATION IN ONLINE DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes as its starting point the Fall 2015 emergence of the #ShoutYourAbortion movement, and examines specific features of the pro-choice online discourse community which necessitated its intervention. The pro-choice movement’s renewed emphasis on public self-identification through storytelling seeks to combat stigma and to emphasize the positive possibilities of abortion access. But normalizing narratives also reproduce linguistic features and narrative tropes which emphasize heterofuturist logics. The specific rhetorical mechanisms through which this occurs will be examined here. An introductory chapter establishes the theoretical and feminist advocacy contexts of specific instances of pro-choice rhetoric in order to frame an argument about the heteronormalizing narrative tropes of the current pro-choice vocabulary. The second chapter explores the coercive potential of linguistic features that appear frequently in narratives which the community tends to emphasize and affirm, while the third chapter performs close readings of negatively coercive in-group responses to accounts of reproductive choice which deviate from the preferred decision-making paradigms. These readings suggest how self-regulation within this discourse community serves to alienate “bad” examples; such rejections limit the range of logics and emotions that women acculturated by this rhetoric will feel justified or legitimate in experiencing.
This dynamic is important to foreground as the advocacy community struggles to define what membership in the group will mean, and which narrative strategies the group will embrace in a politically uncertain moment for reproductive rights.
This thesis is dedicated to my advisor, Prof. Dana Luciano, my second reader, Prof. Pamela Fox, and my thesis seminar instructor Prof. Lori Merish, for taking an interest in my “nonnormative” project idea and encouraging me to pursue it.

And, to those members of my master’s cohort without whose friendship, guidance, and indefatigable late night solidarity the research and writing of this thesis would not have been possible.

Many thanks,
Casey Elizabeth Mank
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THE PRO-CHOICE DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

In September 2015, the hashtag #ShoutYourAbortion reached viral status across several social media platforms. Started in a coordinated effort by feminist grad student Amelia Bonow and well-known body positive blogger Lindy West, the hashtag was intended to spark frank conversation around the often taboo subject of abortion and to encourage rhetorically powerful self-identification; women were asked to “come out” about their abortions in as little or as much detail as they chose, and the fledgling movement made no attempt to curate the experiences to privilege the negative, positive, or ambivalent. The metaphor of coming out is an apt one, both for the movement and for my thesis. Recent articles with titles like “Should you ‘come out’ about your abortion?” and “Why I won’t come out about my abortion” (in The Guardian and Jezebel, respectively) show that the online pro-choice community is very aware of the ways in which abortion-seeking women might be culturally queered, and that they understand the process of public representation through which such women can potentially become part of more “normal” and visible public life. The ambivalence of the two titles (chosen from among many similar online musings) also suggests the state of division over rhetorical strategy and branding of the public pro-choice face. The #ShoutYourAbortion model seemed more willing to embrace the queer implications of the “coming out” model. The original message (posted to Facebook by Bonow and Tweeted, to her own larger audience, by West) read:

Hi guys! Like a year ago I had an abortion at the Planned Parenthood on Madison Ave, and I remember this experience with a nearly inexpressible level of gratitude. Plenty of people still believe that on some level—if you are a good woman—abortion is a choice which should [be] accompanied by
some level of sadness, shame, or regret. But you know what? I have a good heart and having an abortion made me happy in a totally unqualified way. Why wouldn’t I be happy that I was not forced to become a mother?
(Bonow in Vara)

Bonow both identifies and reacts critically to the terms and tropes of a hegemonic “choice” vocabulary, in which women approach their narratives in a spirit of confession and justificatory explanation. She explicitly indicates the limiting opinions held by “plenty of people,” calls out the gender essentialism inhering in the cultural icon of the “good woman,” and notes the subtly coercive social force which prescribes that she “should be” experiencing specific negative emotions. Bonow also “describe[s] herself, pointedly, as not only pro-choice but pro-abortion” in her interview with New Yorker journalist Vauhini Vara (“Can #ShoutYourAbortion Turn Hashtag Activism into a Movement?”). The article describes Bonow and West’s efforts to launch a site and begin crowdfunding for a series of video confessionals in order to capitalize on the hashtag’s momentum. In the intervening year, Bonow and West seem to have failed to parlay the hashtag into a more sustainable social justice movement after the model of #BlackLivesMatter, but the groundswell of energy behind the #ShoutYourAbortion campaign during its viral moment calls for a consideration of the rhetorical landscape into which it emerged and attempted its intervention.

The Discourse Community Past and Present

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the specific discourse community out of which a critical movement like #ShoutYourAbortion could arise, and why its response to the pro-choice status quo was necessary and timely. In Decoding Abortion Rhetoric:
Communicating Social Change, Celeste Condit defines *in-group rhetoric* as “discourse directed to those audiences already committed to the central vocabulary of any group (227). #Shout arose as a factional response to its ambivalent parent community of pro-choice, feminist-influenced citizens. The central vocabulary of that group is “a woman’s right to choose.” But as I will show in the chapters that follow, allegiance to the vocabulary of this “right” often comes with many caveats. By withholding support for *all* choices as undertaken by *all* individuals, the mainstream pro-choice community has been an insufficient representative for the reproductive health concerns of a number of intersecting marginalized communities.

In “What is Reproductive Justice?: How Women of Color Activists are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm,” Kimala Price explains that, in place of “rights” or “choice,” advocates of reproductive justice have combined feminist frameworks with broader social justice critiques to rhetorically create “space for women of color, low-income women, women with disabilities, and other women who have been marginalized not only within the mainstream reproductive rights movement, but also in society at large” (44). The frustration of these variously defined “other women,” writes Price, “partly stems from the ‘choice’ rhetoric of the movement, which is problematic because it is based on a set of assumptions that applies only to a small group of women who are privileged enough to have multiple choices” (46). Dorothy Roberts makes a similar point in *Killing The Black Body*, writing that the pro-choice movement’s focus on “abstract freedom to choose is of meager value without meaningful options from which to choose and the ability to effectuate one’s choice” (309).¹ Roberts writes that women of color

¹ For more critiques of the terminology of choice, specifically, see also: “Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice” by Andrea Smith in *NWSA*. Smith notes that the choice
and low-income women “must deal with a whole range of forces that impair their choices. Their reproductive freedom, for example, is limited not only by the denial of access to safe abortions, but also by the lack of resources necessary for a healthy pregnancy” (300). If the reproductive justice movement represents an alternative paradigm which seeks to expand the conversation beyond a narrow focus on abortion to encompass a “broader range of reproductive health issues” (Roberts 301), the “pro-abortion” focus articulated by Bonow could be considered a differently situated critique which seeks to articulate a complementary but related shortcoming in the rhetoric of the pro-choice mainstream.

In her history of the reproductive justice movement, Price asks whether it is “merely an outgrowth of the pro-choice movement? Is it a countermovement? Or is it a parallel movement in its own right that is distinctive from the pro-choice movement?” (49). #ShoutYourAbortion suggests similar questions about positioning in relation to the mainstream advocacy community. My third chapter illustrates the new movement’s commitment to identifying and challenging weaknesses in the language and storytelling strategies of conciliatory, defensive pro-choice writers. Although it arose out of a number of explicitly stated frustrations with the larger movement, #Shout also sought to revitalize pro-choice and feminist potentials at least as much as it sought to stake claims to the “parallel” or “distinctive” type of movement Price describes. #ShoutYourAbortion was a pointed response to the larger, more ambivalent pro-choice center which seeks to safeguard legal rights by tactics of non-antagonism toward the pro-life extreme. The “in-group feminist discourse on abortion” (Condit 12) constituted by a movement like #Shout

paradigm also depends on “individualist, consumerist notions of ‘free’ choice that do not take into consideration all the social, economic, and political conditions that frame the so-called choices” women make (197).
can be read as a challenge to decades of defensive posturing on the part of more mainstream pro-choice advocates and organizations. This thesis does not specifically examine the critical efficacy of hashtag activism, but explores the rhetorical landscape of shared and contested meanings into which this specific movement attempted to intervene with new vocabularies.

Before the short viral success of the #Shout hashtag, persuasive personal storytelling had already been a staple tactic of pro-choice rhetoric. This includes narratives from the “near-perfect vehicle” (Condit 29) found in Sherri Finkbine’s account of her 1962 pre-Roe abortion in Sweden, to those contributed by the 113 female lawyers who included their abortion stories in an amicus brief in 2016 as a reaction to restrictive Texas case Whole Women’s Health v. Cole. As Condit explains, “narratives were the first discursive units to break the icy public silence—the refusal to articulate abortion” (13). What all of these narratives have had in common beyond their personal therapeutic dimensions is a strategic commitment to normalizing abortion through relatable cultural representation. This thesis considers how the tradition of individual storytelling has been both potentially effective and problematically allied with the hegemonic cultural values of a mainstream, implicitly white and heteronormative national discourse. It is against this backdrop that a self-reflexively positive, offense-ive, and unapologetic activist movement like #ShoutYourAbortion must be understood, as a bid to expand pro-choice usefulness to more groups and users. I hyphenate “offense-ive,” above, to highlight its double meaning in the context of abortion rhetoric and of my thesis; although I want to use it to describe the natural opposite of “defensive rhetoric,” its meaning as assertive, positive, active, or on-the-offensive seems to get lost under its more prevalent everyday
use as insulting or rude. While more mainstream or choice-ambivalent narrative framings of abortion temper their offensive strategies to downplay negative dimensions, the stories that I consider in my third chapter, including Bonow’s own, embrace the spectrum of possible offensiveness to hegemonic values at the same time as they accept the full queer potential of “coming out” in public forums.

As Condit explains, the legal permission granted by Roe v. Wade in 1973 “was not translated into unmitigated cultural sanction” (138). Her description of the “competition between two powerful, incommensurable discourses” (202) which arose after legalization remains an accurate picture of the current state of polarization between what became “life” and “choice.” In this standoff, the pro-life vocabulary came to control the terms and characterizations that were available to both sides. In an introduction to the essay collection From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: Transforming a Movement, Marlene Gerber Fried also writes about the strategic concessions that the pro-choice movement has made in the years since Roe. She describes a pro-choice community which, in response to the aggressive representational tactics of the anti-abortion movement, has “attempted to sanitize its own demands” because “insisting on abortion rights as a necessary condition of all women’s sexual freedom continues to be seen as too threatening, too risky, too selfish” (6). She affirms that “fear of further losses is causing some mainstream pro-choice groups to continue the defensive posture that has characterized the pro-choice movement since Roe v. Wade. They argue that if we fail to compromise, we will lose everything (7). But this compromise, whether stated as ideology or more subtly re-negotiated through non-offensive terms and vocabularies, also risks reifying terms which are essentially hostile to
broader queer and intersectional feminist aims of disrupting gender essentialism and compulsory reproduction. Condit writes that:

Rhetoric—as the process of public argument and persuasion—exerts a force of its own on the underlying social processes that it articulates. That is, public discourse is an active, change-producing, transformative process, not merely a passive conveyer belt. Because rhetorical units affect each other, in part through the consequences of specific discursive configurations themselves, particular ways of talking (and hence, of understanding and acting) may come into social being. (11)

While much of Condit’s analysis is devoted to explicating the mechanics of how appropriating traditional values and ideographs can successfully mainstream new social acts and actors, she also warns that borrowing terms from any ideology changes both the speech act that uses such terms, and the real world options that such a speech act facilitates or forecloses. Borrowing images and characterizations from hetero-patriarchy can be convincing to those broader audiences which are committed to its goals. At the same time, such a strategy limits options for “understanding and acting” to privileged “legitimate choice-makers” (Smith 128). Such legitimacy is always contingent upon race, class, and the specific heteronormativity which essentializes certain women as inevitable mothers. It is this last coercive element which I will examine in detail in my argument.

Lynn Chancer’s essay “Abortion Without Apology” also reviews how far anti-abortion rhetoric had already permeated the vocabularies available for feminist ways of thinking and talking about abortion in 1990. She describes “a cultural atmosphere still
inconsistent in its commitment to abortion,” and which continues to enact “the profound conditioning that has told us we are supposed to have babies and feel guilty for sex that bears no consequences, that we are to prioritize others over ourselves” (114). In one especially interesting moment, Chancer describes even committedly pro-choice abortion clinic workers “who had come to presume that clients must be feeling something negative” (115 emphasis added). The indirectness of her phrase “had come to presume” stands out. This, with her description of “profound conditioning,” is analogous to Bonow’s “should be” as enforced by the dispersed agency of “plenty of people.” In her own combination think piece and personal narrative, which I examine in the final chapter of this thesis, Bonow echoes this concern about “profound conditioning,” calling it instead a “brainwashing,” and setting out to speak from a position outside such pervasive logics.

It is precisely habituation to repeated linguistic and narrative features which functions to allow actors participating in this ongoing discussion to “come to presume” certain things as natural or intrinsic. This persistent rhetorical habituation is also the reason that close attention to the narrative features of even purportedly pro-choice cultural texts can be especially informative. Chancer agrees that “not simply the tone but the content of language itself compounds the social pressure, that compulsory imposition of meaning…casts an aura of moral illegitimacy around abortion” (115). In the sections that follow, I will examine how, that is, through which rhetorical moves and community pressures, these “compulsory” meanings are negotiated and enforced in an updated context, as well as how “other” agents like Bonow seek a rhetorical ground outside such
logics, but still work to change the inclusiveness of the broader feminist and pro-choice movements from within inside the pro-choice movement.

While much interesting criticism has focused on the more overt coercive language and imagery used by opponents of abortion, I will be looking instead at rhetoric which means to be outspokenly pro-choice, and which often comes from a place tacitly informed by feminist (or “post-feminist”) logics. In spite of the good intentions and probable short-term tactical advantages of forging ideological links between responsible (re)productivity and abortion access, this strategy leaves no space for individuals who undertake the same actions within different ethical, practical, and personal frameworks. As noted above, this has historically excluded women of color and low-income parents who “are punished for having babies because they fail to measure up to the state’s ideal of motherhood” (Roberts 305), in addition to contributing to xenophobic fears that educated white women are, at the same time, “not fertile enough” (270, emphasis added). In other words, while the fertility of women of color and low-income women (especially those relying on government assistance for food and health care) has been seen as a selfish and irresponsible use of communal resources, the lack of fertility of wealthy women has been seen as selfishly failing to participate in the responsible reproduction of the nation.

In either case, if what Gerber Fried called the “too threatening...too selfish”\(^2\) abortion is not defended equally with the “self-less,” then each woman’s degree of

\(^2\) As with offensive, it is impossible to use the word selfish without a negative connotation. On this point, Condit defines selfish as: “the desire to serve one’s own interests before those of others; significantly, the term is ascribed to women more frequently than men, presumably because greater self-sacrifice has historically been expected of women than of men” (229). Throughout this thesis, I have tried to substitute some different, unwieldy options like “self-sufficient” or “telos-of-the-self” to suggest possibilities for the
investment in correct or normative reproductive futurism becomes open to examination and perhaps coercive regulation. This legitimizes, along with problematic idea of socially desirable and undesirable maternity, “the view that there are morally acceptable and morally unacceptable abortions” (Gerber Fried 8). I argue that this stratification into the justified and unjustified, as they align with the persuasive and the unpersuasive, formulate a binary which #ShoutYourAbortion was attempting to disrupt. This disruption, while specific, represents perhaps one small facet of ongoing intersectional calls for updated alternative or updated “paradigms for articulating reproductive justice” (Smith 119).

A queer theory informed analysis can clarify the precise mechanisms through which the regulatory sorting described above takes place, specifically within online pro-choice communities. In her reading of the contested repertoire of meanings in the abortion debate, from pre-legalization to 1990, Condit had to lament the “ephemeral” (12) nature of public speech acts. I hope to adapt some of her insights to the vast archive of cultural moments available to us now in the form of online discourse communities. The medium through which contention is expressed may have been updated, but the resolute national stalemate between “incommensurable discourses” (202) has not been ameliorated in the decades since Condit published her study. In fact, the combination of publicity, anonymity, and accessibility found online seems only to have intensified the compulsive drive for rhetors to produce discourse and to engage with the discourse that others produce. The resulting cultural record includes everything from abusive, malapropistic trolling to sophisticated think pieces backed up by layers of hyperlinked think-ability and speakability of self-focused decision making frameworks. The near-impossibility of articulating this in a neutral (not to mention positive) way seems significant.
statistics. Because of this increase in both self-reflexive interactivity and public production, my thesis can expand on Condit’s analysis of magazines, essay collections, and legal documents; the comments sections available online, in particular, allow a permanent inscription of even the most casual, unscripted reactions to the terms of in-group public rhetoric. As my third chapter will show, this expanded archive offers new opportunities to pinpoint the ways in which discourse communities draw lines between acceptable and unacceptable vocabularies and characterizations. I will argue that moral legitimacy and membership in the community have much to do with the perceived persuasive efficacy of narratives in this highly public online space.

Condit explains that detailed rhetorical analysis is vital because discourse is, in fact, “a change agent in itself” (3). She writes that “public discourse simply adds one more source from which women can gain an additional vocabulary of potential use in their lives,” and that “‘persuasion’...is not solely a process of changing closed minds but is also the addition of possibilities” (193 emphasis added). As I’ve noted, #ShoutYourAbortion was never meant to attract staunch anti-abortion activists to the cause, but rather to encourage change within pro-choice discourse itself, and to provide an expanded possibility of coalition and community to the women who shared their unedited experiences. Condit’s diachronic analysis of the word “want” provides an invaluable model of how to identify the specific functions of recurring terms and images within a community’s public communications. She considers the narrative features in a collection of self-consciously persuasive personal stories about women who had abortions. This collection, *Pregnant By Mistake: The Stories of Seventeen Women*, was published in 1973, and constitutes an important early example of the political impact of
stories. These stories were told by women who were aware, to varying degrees, of the ultimate rhetorical purpose of their words and self-characterizations; they were also edited to greater persuasive advantage by professional authors, like the more recent narratives I will examine in my second chapter. Condit notes that the women frequently framed the issue of reproductive choice in terms of what they did and did not want. Within their own contexts of reasoning, want was a logical and moral force, giving them “sufficient justification in themselves” (186). But as the larger pro-choice movement appropriated the terms of such stories to its public modes of discourse, the want that related to women’s needs and prerogatives underwent a cultural translation into the stronger ideograph of unwanted children:

To be persuasive in the public realm, the women’s vocabulary—their ways of seeing the issues and speaking about them—had to be transformed. The women’s term want was able to enter the social vocabulary and to exert public force only when transformed so that it indicated its impact on others. An individual desire...became a threat to a well-integrated society.

“Unwanted” children, the articles made clear, were not socially desirable. (186)

Thus, Condit explains, women were able to make their privately articulated wants count only insofar as these wants underwent a strategic translation into the terms and purposes most legible and convincing to the larger public. The convincingness of

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3 In a related genealogy which illustrates the danger of accommodating arguments to social vocabularies which are fundamentally hostile to them, Dorothy Roberts outlines the strategic concessions which Margaret Sanger and the original birth control movement made to the language of eugenics and population control. She writes that the movement’s “original feminist version of voluntary motherhood was soon overshadowed by the gender-neutral goal of family planning and population control” (58) because eugenics “provided a sexually neutral language with which to speak publicly about reproduction” (79). Today, she
maternal purposes to the national imagination has been influenced not only by heteronormativity, but also by race and class, which have “historically determined the value society places on a woman’s right to choose motherhood” (Roberts 182). For example, as Roberts explains, “white childbearing is generally thought to be a beneficial activity” which “allows the nation to flourish,” while “Black reproduction, on the other hand, is treated as a form of degeneracy” (9). Both Condit’s story of wants becoming the socially unwanted, and Roberts’s analysis of how the early birth control movement both appropriated—and was appropriated for—eugenics, offer warnings about the ways that such strategic representations or re-definitions always carry rhetorical and political consequences. “In seeking to persuade others,” Condit writes, “persuaders adapt their case to the audience’s interests and are thereby ‘persuaded’ to represent the issue in terms that incorporate more than their own unalloyed experiences. The process of persuasion is thereby inherently a process of compromise” (200). In these examples, although abortion rights and family planning may have gained traction by seeming to prevent that which was considered “not socially desirable,” the legitimacy of women’s wants or desires for themselves was compromised, in both cases, to the point of invisibility. Publicly convincing discourse did not have a place for the queerer desires (queerer in the sense of not reproducing hetero-patriarchy in the way that it requires) represented in women’s “unalloyed experiences.”

In their study of the class-differentiated opinions of American women, Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole also found that an uneasy sense of ideological and rhetorical compromise was built.

writes in her preface to the new edition of Killing The Black Body, mainstream women’s health advocacy groups are too often “still promoting birth control as a way to save taxpayer money spent on unintended, welfare-dependent children, rather than a way for women to have greater control over their lives” (xx).
into the pro-choice paradigm. Collated from the first person informal accounts of interviewed participants, Press and Cole’s findings, especially among middle-class pro-choice women, help to define the implicit and problematic ideological majority to and against which I argue #ShoutYourAbortion attempted to speak:

These women claimed to be passionately pro-choice because ‘no one should tell someone else what to do’ about abortion. Paradoxically, most were also adamantly opposed to abortion for themselves. This is the essence of a liberal perspective on abortion: in the abstract, each individual’s right to have an abortion is defended, while abortion as a person decision is categorically rejected. (106)

Middle class pro-choice women are thus what Marlene Gerber Fried calls “soft supporters,” or “those who support abortion only under some circumstances” (7). Throughout this thesis, I add the term choice ambivalent to describe the position of those community members who articulate a pro-choice positionality that depends on numerous problematically heteronormative and classist caveats. While pro-choice persuasive materials may have little chance of reaching the anti-abortion stalwarts entrenched in what Condit calls our current “resolute schizophrenia” (147) about abortion in the U.S., they can seek to retain and mobilize the support of this large and ambivalent group. As I have discussed, numerous critiques have mobilized over the years to point out whose needs and viewpoints are marginalized by such conciliatory discourse strategies. In my own argument, I will focus specifically on the heteronormative pronatalism that essentializes certain women as reproductive. A queer theory critical framework can illuminate which, precisely, are the hegemonic reproducively oriented values that act
most strongly upon the sort of soft supporters whom Press and Cole call “the true believers in our system, supporting its hegemonic values” (122).

**Queer Theory Interventions: Identifying the Reproductive Futurism Underlying Pro-Choice Discourse**

Condit writes that broader persuasiveness depends upon movements finding “super-ordinate values, narratives, and characterizations that present proposed policies in terms that represent their desirability for other community members” (200). I want to apply a queer theory-informed reading to abortion rhetoric because this set of terms and considerations is uniquely positioned to problematize the pronatalist roots of what is sayable and convincing within the pro-choice community. Condit writes that “rhetors advance claims on ‘the nation’ couched in terms of major values...to the extent that they are successful at convincing the public of this potential for general good, they are able to enact their will” (6). Lee Edelman’s argument in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* shows that perhaps nothing is so convincingly linked to our idea of the “general good” as what he calls *reproductive futurism*.

In his book, Edelman explores the critical “efficacy of queerness” (18) to disrupt the heteronormative pronatalism of symbolic meaning. He uses a Lacanian analysis of U.S. political discourse to consider its unconscious, unstoppable quest for meaning-making contingent on a belief in the future as figured by The Child. In this critique, the world of communicative, social meanings is symbolic, and Edelman explains that our world of shared meanings, which enable all political legibility, are predicated on an imagined future which by definition can never arrive. This means that all politics and sociality depends on endless deferral to the figural Child of the future. This figural Child
is the one for whom, and because of whom, the symbolic order of meaning exists. The figural queer, in contrast, by not participating in the literal or ideological reproduction of futurity, can explore the “political self-destruction that inheres in...the act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life” (30). In Edelman’s argument, positions not conforming to the logic of reproductive futurism appear impossible to the point of being “unthinkable” and “outside the political domain” (2). I suggest that such “unthinkability” is being foist upon marginalized community members when pro-choice discourse casts out narratives that do not allow the movement to appear “communal” and “responsible.”

In addition to being problematically loaded with gender ideology, “communal responsibility” is also marked by assumptions about race and class, as I have used both Condit and Roberts’s historical examples to suggest. In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen writes that “marginal group members, lacking power and privilege although engaged in heterosexual behavior, have often found themselves defined as outside the norms and values of dominant society” (454). For example, she explains that the “demonization of single mothers, teen mothers, and primarily, poor women of color dependent on state assistance” (455) has created categories of heterosexuals who are nonetheless outside of heteronormativity. Likewise, I will look at performances of narrative resistance that are heterosexual but still non-normative, such as the story of #ShoutYourAbortion co-founder Amelia Bonow, who “came out” about her abortion decision in a way that explicitly queers her story as irresponsible and non-heteronormative.
In the context of abortion rhetoric specifically, “communal responsibility” ideologically links the pro-choice movement to what Condit calls “the most widely shared valuations” (26) possible. Press and Cole also identify their focus group of middle class pro-choice women as being particularly suspicious of “decisions they felt were irresponsible” (110 emphasis added). “Good” abortion stories, those which can be safely situated within a futurist logic of motherhood, depend on the extent to which they can demonstrate, in contrast, a legible sense of agonized or difficult responsibility to the community of future others. If personal narratives have a long history of performing normalizing and visibility-making work within the movement, it should be no surprise that they often use ultra-legible, heteronormative terms or “characterizations” to do so, using, rather than confronting or disrupting, “the beliefs and social conditions in the existing American repertoire” (Condit 25).

In PRO: Reclaiming Abortion Rights, for example, author Katha Pollitt performs precisely such a strategy, using an “offense-ive” or assertive tone but relying on more conservative pronatalist values to structure her argument. In fact, Katha Pollitt explicitly addresses PRO—which I read as exemplary of the attempt to repackage abortion support in a non-threatening but gender-problematic vocabulary of pronatalist arguments—to the “sleeping giant” of complacent pro-choice moderates. She appeals to those soft supporters or choice-ambivalent readers who are more or less comfortable with a vocabulary of mainstream values, but who might also be willing to see abortion as having a valued place within such values, as opposed to being part of a queer feminist tool kit which dismantles them. For example, she writes that “abortion is part of being a mother and of caring for children, because part of caring for children is knowing when it’s not a
good idea to bring them into the world” (16 emphasis added). She urges the ambivalent “muddled middle” of the pro-choice community to “put abortion back into its context, which is the lives and bodies of women, but also the lives of men, and families, and the children those women already have or will have” (16 emphasis added). There is a dangerous tendency toward essentializing women as reproductive and maternally responsible in this language which threatens to eclipse other ways of being and deciding.

The emphasis I have added to Pollitt’s lines suggests a repeated drive toward incorporation of abortion “into” or as “part of” motherhood and family. This incorporation would leave no ground for other types of stories—queerer stories, in Edelman’s terms, or racialized ones as discussed by Roberts and Cohen—to stand on, forcing them to erase the full complexity of their experiences and desires if they wish to be legible to their ostensibly pro-choice community of support, which flattens them both by denying the importance of supported motherhood for low-income women, and by assuming the inevitability of a socially desirable motherhood at the correct, family-inscribed moment for wealthy white women. As Condit warns, when new interests “use the old public vocabulary to express their demands, and that vocabulary” will be “loaded against them” (35).

The “bad” abortion stories that I consider later in this thesis embrace what Pollitt calls “pleasure and convenience” (30) or what Edelman more ironically calls “the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments” (13). These impossible to integrate abortion stories are precisely those which have the greatest potential to queer gender and to confront the unexamined pronatalism that invisibly disciplines speakability in politics.

Although Edelman cautions that the version of queerness he articulates “can never define
an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17), such a disturbance could be powerful and useful in the way it imagines inhabiting the unthinkable or untenable space outside the legible spectrum of reproductive futurist political debate. He explains that “conservatism preemptively imagines the wholesale rupturing of the social fabric, whereas liberalism conservatively clings to a faith in its limitless elasticity” (14). This misplaced liberal belief in elasticity enacts an aspirational structure in which normalization is possible in theory, but problematic in practice. The marginalized can indeed move toward the heterofuturist center, but only, Edelman writes, “by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The structural position of queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain” (27).

Edelman suggests that the queered subject might “undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification” (27). As in many of Edelman’s complex sentences, the word “reproduce” is meant to bear a double meaning in his discussion of the reproduction of signification; he discusses abortion in his book by looking at the figure inside a woman on a pro-life billboard he encounters. This figure, The Child, becomes the disciplinary image which, in his argument, produces the future, and for whom the future is produced. But in endlessly reproducing the figural Child, the world of symbolics that Edelman describes also endlessly reproduces The Mother. Though Edelman does not consider the ways in which The Child’s stifling inevitability also creates a compulsory state of always already maternity for women, I will attempt to expand upon this possibility in my subsequent chapters. In particular, I will highlight a strange use of the future anterior in which abortion seeking women are described—or
describe themselves—as The Mother who will have been in an inescapable temporal loop of retroactive, maternal justification.

Though Edelman’s book addresses abortion and the female body only fleetingly, he arrives at the same conclusion that much of the defensive pro-choice community seems to have embraced: “no more than the right will the left, therefore, identify itself with abortion,” he writes, “instead...it aligns itself with ‘choice.’ Who would, after all, come out for abortion or stand against reproduction, against futurity, and so against life?” (16). Edelman and the #ShoutYourAbortion movement have in common an intent to “disturb” a complacent or normative identity, but of course the hashtag activism movement has also been interested in envisioning supportive coalition building for political change. In order to explain the marginalizing caveats in the pro-choice mainstream which inspired the hashtag and other nonnormative coming out stories in the online space, Edelman’s diagnosis of reproductive futurism is extremely useful; while looking toward future community-building, what José Muñoz calls the “antirelationality” (12) of his future-denying refusals may be less relevant. In the introduction to his 

*Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz addresses Edelman’s implied antisociality directly. While he finds negative queer critiques to be “important resources” (13) for thinking about heteronormativity, he also defines the queer relationship to futurity differently. He asserts that “the future is queerness’s domain” (1) and argues that hope can be “both a critical affect and a methodology” (4). In fact, Muñoz identifies “queer feminist and queer of color critiques” as important counterweights to the somewhat hopeless antirelationality of a critique like Edelman’s.
In spite of these objections to Edelman’s critique as a basis for positive coalition building, I would like to take Edelman’s gestures toward the figural significance of the abortion question further, especially because it is such a gendered literalization of the “unthinkable” rejection of reproductive futurism. In Edelman’s argument, the “structural position of queerness” functions as a necessary reassurance to the legible futurist politics which so vocally reject it. He thus describes a structure of discourse and meaning-making in which someone must always be queered in order that others may join the “elastic” center of liberal-progressivism. Perhaps the most obvious recent example (which has been amply problematized elsewhere) is the success of LGBTQ advocates in allying a certain privileged public image with the photogenic two-dad or two-mom family. In this way, queerness was put to work in the service of reproductive futurism, and thus achieved the legal victory of Marriage Equality. The liberal center was proven to be as elastic as some advocates had hoped—but Edelman’s structural considerations require us to ask whom, in such a case, had to accept “the figural burden of the queer”? Likewise, when a pro-choice advocate like Pollitt writes that “abortion is part of motherhood and of caring for children” (16 emphasis added), we must consider not only the rights-securing value of this strategic consolidation, but also which populations and which narratives might be queered in the process of rhetorically moving abortion from the margins into the “center” represented by a certain type of responsible and socially desirable motherhood and (re)productivity.

It is relevant to consider the ways that an avowed “pro-abortion” stance like Amelia Bonow’s answers the implied challenge or call-to-action found in Edelman’s question about whom, exactly, would come out “against life itself.” Bonow is pro-
abortion, but also, as a closer look at her story in my third chapter will show, interested in
telling a story which is fully invested in nonnormative possibilities for life and living.
Bonow and other nonnormative storytellers represent themselves without necessarily
expecting to be seen as representational. Bonow, for example, is careful not generalize
from her experience to others; she only asks that her own version of “unalloyed
experience” be allowed to stand un-translated and un-sanitized by incorporation within
hegemonic futurist contexts. I will explore the possibility that, devastating as the
Conservative agenda of rhetorical “awfulization” around abortion has been, the pro-
choice advocacy community itself has also perpetuated—around some abortions—the
figural queerness that stubbornly adheres to them in the public imagination. In my next
chapter, for example, I will read two examples in which “good” or respectable abortion-
seeking women are explicitly defined against self-focused, childless, playful women
whom the authors argue should be less visible in the public imagination.

Rhetorical Production of the Queer and the Normal in Pro-Choice Discourse

In Speaking of Abortion, Press and Cole explain that moderate and ambivalent
pro-choice women tend to identify abortion “with people who are ‘other’ either
materially or psychologically, whose existence they acknowledged but whom they spoke
of as inhabiting a world far from” their own lives (108). In spite of the repeated
rhetorical separations that Press and Cole’s interviewee groups draw between themselves
and “other” abortion-choosing women, quite a few of them had previously terminated, or
had seriously considered terminating, a pregnancy. But in their narratives, these
incidents emerged as part of a moment which they consider other and separate from their
real trajectory through life. Here, the “fault line in the logic of legitimation underlying
the pro-choice movement” (124) becomes even more pronounced, as storytellers attempt to distance themselves from characterizations which would include abortion as part of their story or timeline. Press and Cole explain that “the moment when that choice was made or considered was seen as ‘apart’ from their ‘real’ life, a temporary aberration from which their return to material or psychological ‘normality’ was swift and the break was clean” (109).

With this focus on the positioning of the “other,” the “apart,” and the “aberration,” Press and Cole’s findings, especially among middle-class pro-choice women, demonstrate what Edelman calls a “compulsory abjuration of the future-negating queer” (26). The women in this subgroup framed abortion not only as a queer or “aberrant” detour from normalcy and meaning, but one which, in order to be justifiable, must be in service to their larger, more legible narratives of reproductive futurism. That is, it was often retroactively justified as having facilitated the reinstatement of a correct lifecourse leading to family and children at a socially desirable and “responsible” time. Of course, this coercive maternal temporality has not only heteronormative, but also racist and classist assumptions built in; for some women, it will never appear be the “right time” or the right level of income and stability to produce the correct, socially desirable child that specific articulations of white, middle-class heteronormativity demand.

In Press and Cole’s study, the interviewees could accept a “temporary aberration” which did not prevent a return to the normal flow of time that always subordinates now to the future, and the eventual Mother to the eventual Child. In many of the examples I found, this also means submitting to a temporal logic in which a woman makes every
decision as a mother because she inevitably will have been one by the time she tells her story. This future anteriority of inevitable motherhood becomes a strategic trope of the conciliatory abortion narrative because the greatest proof of a woman’s re-normalization into futurism is, of course, the eventual production of children at the “right” time. Various temporal phrases and their variants (“not the right time,” “not right now,” “when she is ready”) are ubiquitous to the conciliatory, reproduction-emphasizing rhetoric of the pro-choice mainstream, and to the personal narratives which have adopted its tropes and terms. Condit explains that “for persuasiveness and consistency” of “culturally potent” narratives, the woman who has typically been able to claim a “good” abortion was always “making a choice not against motherhood but against situations which themselves violated the idealized image of motherhood” (26). In the examples I consider in chapter two, for example, the aberrant or queer incident can be proven to facilitate an ultimately legible (that is, future-producing) life; abortion prevents ill-timed, irresponsible, or otherwise “bad” maternity and is therefore offered as the practice of “good,” responsible, and socially desirable maternity. Reactions to what we might call queerer abortion narratives—those which perform and embrace what Edelman calls the queer’s “stubborn denial of teleology” (27)—show how the selfsame acts, absent their apologist work of heterofuturist meaning-making, can be rejected even by vocally pro-choice identifying audiences. My third chapter will look at this disciplinary communal force upon more overtly “queer” narratives which resist the terms of reproductive futurism.

Press and Cole also write that “in middle-class women...the pro-choice opinion was often qualified”(108). The category of time-related phrases, above, denotes the inevitability of reinscription within reproductive time, always asking when of maternal
responsibility and never whether. A second, related category of “qualifiers” functions as a disciplinary method to police adherence to reproductive logics of time and feeling.

From the carte blanche for judgement built into the “rare” of “Safe, Legal, and Rare,” to the ubiquitous comment section interjection “I’m pro-choice, but,” these qualifiers could be thought of as the mechanism by which some abortion stories pass within the legible “side” of a heterofuturist national discourse, while others encounter the limits of liberalism’s supposed “elasticity,” and find themselves labeled as ‘not representative,’ and therefore unworthy of political representation or advocacy. Qualifiers are the linguistic feature through which advocates of social change can demonstrate that they apply an agreed-upon meaning-making framework even when their application of such a framework might lead to results which are still in the process of being legitimated or agreed-upon. For example, Condit writes that “abortion narratives had to use images of motherhood to argue for a choice against specific instances of motherhood…the needs or desires of the majority of women who sought abortion were thereby masked, or at least not articulated” (31). Thus when #ShoutYourAbortion co-founder Amelia Bonow included in the movement-inaugurating post that “having an abortion made [her] happy in a totally unqualified way” (emphasis added), she was responding pointedly to the language of “soft supporters” in order to strategically counter this erasure and re-open negotiations about the vocabularies possible for the broader pro-choice movement.

If Condit’s analysis of public, political speech acts explains how trading on commonly held valuations and ideographs can gradually legitimize a cause, then Edelman’s theoretical critique of the symbolics that underwrite legibility explains why such valuations and ideographs are compelling, and even inescapable. While Condit’s
field is rhetoric and communications, and thus entirely concerned with how communities form identities through discourse, Edelman’s analysis imagines queerness disrupting the pronatalism that marks the impassable boundaries of our current politics. Edelman’s Lacanian analysis and Condit’s social, relational study have different disciplinary starting points, but they sometimes articulate similar ideas about how bids for political legibility can cause exclusionary normalization. According to Edelman’s critique, reproductive futurism defines the limits of our available political discourse. These limits preserve, he writes, “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable” alternative subjectivities or frameworks for meaning-making. Likewise, Condit says that successful public spokespersons for particular causes will “use rather than confront the beliefs and social conditions in the existing American repertoire” (25). For example, the women from Pregnant By Mistake in her analysis might find themselves able to pass within the bounds of the elastic liberal center that Edelman describes, but only by leaving their queerly self-focused wants and desires at the door.

In the chapters that follow, I will use rhetorical analysis informed by queer theory to demonstrate how specific tropes and units of discourse are being actively negotiated by online pro-choice communities. My second chapter focuses on two narratives which frame women as always already mothers in order to tell stories about “good” women with “good” reasons for choosing abortion. These stories blend journalism, statistics, women’s own words, and culturally potent images of children and families to firmly contextualize the instances of choice they disclose within logics of reproductive futurism. And, as Edelman’s analysis predicts, they shore up their belonging within legible politics.
by creating a figural other—the irresponsible, childless, playful woman—upon whom to shift the status of non-communal, teleology-denying queerness.

The third chapter of this thesis performs a similar reading of two narratives written by women who intentionally perform an alternative logic of playfulness and self-sufficiency. These narratives attempt to escape the “familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 17) while staking a claim to equal representation or speakability in pro-choice spaces. The chapter will also read user comments from self-identifying pro-choice audiences who attempted to variously exclude these stories from the pro-choice platform, to reject them as both un-thinkable and politically ill-advised, and even to reinscribe them within logics of responsible maternity and futurism. Between the two types of narratives in the chapters, and especially between the different ways of claiming belonging to a pro-choice cohort for which one can speak, I identify an ongoing process of rhetorical negotiation over belonging and moral-political legibility. My thesis attempts to look at just one narrow type of figural queering of “other” women. But as I have suggested, this figure is one among many whom the pro-choice paradigm has failed to represent or acknowledge as representative. Identifying the rhetorical mechanisms through which pro-choice legibility politics are perpetuated and negotiated is thus part of a larger ongoing project which continues to re-define new and inclusive paradigms for reproductive justice.
PRONATALIST PRO-CHOICE STORYTELLING

In this chapter, I read confessional-style narratives that are highly representative of the mainstream pro-choice impulse to cast abortion decisions in socially responsible terms. Calling on figural associations with maternity is one such way of normalizing narratives within the sphere of legible pronatalist politics. As Condit writes in her history of the movement, “if abortion itself were to be a ‘good’ act, it had to be undertaken by ‘good,’ women; and given the terms of the dominant vocabulary, only mothers fully qualified in that category” (32). The following examples demonstrate how little this rhetorical situation may have changed since the 70s and 80s, even as the debate itself has expanded into new public forums online. When journalists and “real women” tell public stories of abortion, there is more involved than liberating self-expression. The contributors to these public narratives are necessarily involved in acts of translation and distortion. This is especially noticeable in the aspects they emphasize, the order in which they present information, and the “others” they define themselves against. In these rhetorical moves, there is a clear attempt to advance a positive and sympathetic maternal public face for abortion, which draws its ideological potency from using, rather than disrupting, “super-ordinate values, narratives, and characterizations” (Condit 200).

Telling carefully curated stories in public forums has been a long-standing tactic for pro-choice feminist advocates. Condit explains that narratives are powerful and important forms in almost all human collectives, and that when they are repeated frequently, they begin to ground actionable beliefs (13). For example, many historians of the battle for reproductive rights in the U.S. credit the story of Sherri Finkbine with

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4 For example, Condit calls Finkbine’s story a “near-perfect vehicle” (29) for advancing new ideas about rights while maintaining familiar ideological frameworks. Katha Pollitt notes that “it presented an abortion-
helping to sway public and judicial opinion in the years before *Roe v. Wade*. In Finkbine’s story, we can identify key ways in which a woman’s circumstances, characterization, and framework of reasoning can be carefully presented so as to confound the negative stereotypes sometimes associated with abortion. In 1962, Finkbine was a happily married mother of four who was pregnant with her much wanted fifth child when she took thalidomide pills which she did not know would cause severe fetal anomalies. She was originally approved for a “therapeutic abortion” by her local hospital’s committee, but decided to share her cautionary tale in the newspaper. Negative publicity caused the hospital committee to change its decision, and Finkbine and her husband eventually went to Sweden so that she could have a safe and legal abortion. Condit calls Finkbine the “good woman” (29) who was an ideal “agent of persuasive drama at this site in American history” (29). That is, Finkbine’s abortion story was an ideal representative example, and helped change public opinion about legalization, because it “clearly did not attack the key social symbols of ‘family’ or ‘motherhood’” (29).

Several features are important to take away from this early example of politically persuasive storytelling. Finkbine’s choices were contained within the sphere of heterosexual, family life. She had children both before and after her newsworthy abortion, making it a ‘temporary aberration’ of the type that Press and Cole found important to their moderate pro-choice interviewees in *Speaking of Abortion*. Finkbine could stand in as a representative for “all women,” insofar as the normal woman was imagined (and continues to be imagined) as white, middle-class, straight, and inscribed seeking woman as sympathetic, rational, and capable. Finkbine was not a college student or low-income single mother to be either pitied as a victim or scorned as a slut” (21).
within married family life. Her exemplary normativity, as well as her framework of motivations for seeking abortion, were a successful frame for the injustice of abortion’s illegality at that time. Most importantly, it was very clear that she was “making a choice not against motherhood,” but against a set of circumstances “which themselves violated the idealized image of motherhood” (Condit 26).

Modern day “good” abortion stories are engaged not in a struggle to make abortion services legal, but to keep them legal and—to a dwindling extent—available and affordable. In this sense, they are essentially conservative endeavors; they may seek to change or reduce a social stigma, but their most urgent ideological work is to maintain a legislative status quo. It makes sense, then, that the stories which advance this “conservative” pro-choice cause are also in the business of aggressive normalization. This is not a subtle rhetorical project; in fact, it is often explicitly stated with bold, simple phrases like “abortion is normal” and “women who have abortions are normal.” As Finkbine’s story illustrates, the most expedient way to make a woman and her reproductive health choices normal has been to tie them firmly to the most normative female role of all: motherhood. As I noted in the introduction, normative maternity has also been defined by race and class in specific, damaging, and non-inclusive ways. Motherhood is seen as appropriate and socially beneficial when it is expressed in particular contexts of white heteronormativity, and, as this chapter explores, within a teleology of “responsible” family timing. Here, I will use a few representative examples to outline some of the ways that ideological ties to this specific, problematic model of motherhood and communal futurity are cemented through the terms and tropes of a mainstream pro-choice vocabulary. Edelman’s theory of reproductive futurism can help
to explain why temporal constructions in which all roads lead to motherhood would be the most legible ground on which to build a normalizing narrative. The role that Edelman defines for critical queerness also helps to explain why these stories build their own ground of legibility by performing acts of otherizing exclusion, creating a “straw-woman” of childless, playful irresponsibility to define themselves against.

**Cosmopolitan’s Irrefutable “Kiddos”**

In June 2014, *Cosmopolitan* published an online collection of real women’s stories, as told in their own words, with an introduction by feminist, attorney, and *Cosmo* blog author Jill Filipovic. The article’s title, “I’m a Mother, and I Had an Abortion,” creates an imaginary collectivized woman out of the composite stories contained in the article—a highly *representational* woman. In fact, although the title reads like a quote, none of the three women whose stories are featured includes this line in her narrative. Its primary purpose is certainly to serve as click-bait; but it is also the article’s first example of strategically advancing ideological linkages even as it purports to simply tell ‘true stories’ in women’s own words.

Given the constructedness of the title, it is also significant that we read “I’m a Mother” first, and “I had an Abortion” second. The fictive confessing woman appears in our imagination *first* as a mother, and secondarily as a woman who has had an abortion. This helps to create the real life version of what Press and Cole, in their work on fictional abortion-seeking women on TV, would call “a relatively noncontroversial heroine” (73). A similar construction of carefully ordered clauses will appear throughout many of the sentences I consider here. As I noted in my introduction, Katha Pollitt urges the pro-choice community to “put abortion back into its context” (16) and consider that “abortion
is part of being a mother and of caring for children” (16). If “mother” is the primary identifier and the more important category, and “had an abortion” should be fitted into maternity or figured as a part of it, what does that mean for the speakability and legibility of abortions which happen outside the category?

The Cosmo article’s subtitle reads: “most women who terminate pregnancies are already mothers. Three women spoke candidly about their choices.” This blurb telegraphs a number of subtle messages. Most importantly, it uses the act of translation from numbers to words to stretch 61% (just over half) into a more ambitious “most.” Alone, this might seem like an incidental stylistic choice. But taken alongside the other manipulative moves that appear in the piece, it works again to forcefully collapse the categories of “women who have abortions” with that of “present, future, or potential mothers.” The subtitle’s “candidly” is also heavily belied by the fact that the women featured attempt to expand the implications of their own stories outward, making sweeping generalizations from their own experiences to what they believe is common or normal for other women—or should be.

The photograph that accompanies the article is equally complicit in these ideological gestures. It shows the heads and shoulders of a crowd of anonymous pro-choice protesters. Two hold signs featuring a standard ideograph of the pro-choice movement: the coat hanger. Another protester holds up on her shoulders, instead, a young child. Like the article’s content, the picture works to slyly reinsert the figure of The Child back into the pro-choice narrative; it seems to suggest, as the article certainly does, that the way to choice-ambivalent Americans’ hearts is not through the aggressive, negative imagery of the coat hanger, but through an active ideological re-association with
friendlier, more mainstream ideographs\textsuperscript{5}. As Condit writes, women’s bodies and desires have proven relatively unconvincing to wider, more skeptical publics. A woman’s “want,” she suggests, is “able to enter the social vocabulary and to exert public force only when transformed so that it indicate[s] its impact on others” (186). Edelman likewise asserts that in order to “register as politically responsible,” we must frame ourselves and our choices within the “organizing principle of communal relations” (2) that is reproductive futurism. A protesting mom with a child on her shoulders may indeed be more persuasive than a protesting woman with a poster of a coat hanger and no child in sight, but as Condit warns, when progressive movements use traditional vocabularies (including visual vocabularies) to express their demands, such vocabularies will always be “loaded against them” (35). That is, “in seeking to persuade others,” the persuaders themselves are persuaded, in turn, to accept certain vocabularies and logics (200). By seeking to embed abortion decisions within family frameworks, narratives like Shantae’s, below, are in danger of suggesting that all women’s decisions are the decisions of potential mothers—an essentialism that feminists have long worked to dismantle and de-naturalize.

The article’s preamble from Filipovic sets up a strawman dichotomy between childbirth and abortion—which it then seeks to dismantle. It cites a statistic from the Guttmacher Institute stating that 6 in 10 women who have abortions already have at least

\textsuperscript{5} Condit discusses the successful translation of the pro-life agenda into the single, powerful image of the fetus, then turns to the images that pro-choice advocates have historically had to chose among, the most common of which was the coat hanger. Condit explains that the coat hanger “had limited persuasive impacts” (92), because although the story of illegal abortion and the argument about safety and dignity it represents are persuasive, the actual object it depicts is simply not an inherently moving one (especially as compared to the humanized fetal images used by the opposition). The coat hanger was too complex and required too much knowledge of specific histories to make its ideological point succinctly. More importantly, it was negative, but in a way that had no chance of competing (even when depicted dripping with blood to suggest a repulsive and unjust damage to bodies) with photographic images of “mangled fetuses” (93) that the opposing coalition could bring to the debate.
one child. The rhetorical move that re-integrates abortion to maternity and, by extension, maternity to femaleness, is not a subtle one. The journalist proclaims that “There are not ‘women who have abortions’ on one side and ‘women who are mothers’ on another; those groups are often the same.” Once again, seemingly casual language like Filipovic’s “often” performs, if not an erasure, then certainly a partial eclipse of the apparently less typical women who do not fit into the first group. Like the coat hanger as a visual representation, the childless woman appears to be a representative from which the mainstream pro-choice community would prefer to distance itself in favor of something which will “register” as more “politically responsible” (Edelman 2).

An equally explicit linkage between motherhood, responsibility, and normality soon follows: “Pregnancy, sex, childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, and infertility are all normal parts of women's lives. Yet abortion remains in the shadows, stigmatized and stereotyped as the province of irresponsible young women,” Filipovic writes. In their study of middle-class women, Press and Cole found that moderate or ambivalent pro-choice women tended to identify abortion “with people who are ‘other’ either materially or psychologically” (108). I would argue that, in these highly public online spaces, perceived persuasive efficacy can be inextricably bound up perceptions of moral legitimacy. In order to advance the pro-choice cause and destigmatize the choices of one group (the true majority, we have already been informed in this particular narrative), Filipovic is very willing to trade on the stigma surrounding another, perhaps smaller group of “irresponsible young women.” In the lines above, she contrasts the “normal parts of women’s lives” (all clustered around reproduction) against the “stereotype” of
social and sexual irresponsibility. By openly considering the rhetorical disadvantages of such a stereotype, and by rejecting her as an appropriate characterization of the abortion-seeking woman, Filipovic implies that “irresponsible young women” are not truly representative (in a statistical sense) nor the correct representatives (for political purposes) of women who have abortions.

The article continues to explicitly negotiate these questions about who can tell the public stories of the pro-choice movement: “Here, three women spoke with Cosmopolitan.com about their experiences outside the standard narrative, as mothers who have also terminated pregnancies” (emphasis added). Repeating its earlier move, the introductory section sets up a wrong or politically harmful “standard narrative” against which to oppose itself, rejecting it along with figures to whom “stigma” and “stereotype” too easily adhere. Filipovic suggests that the standard narrative centers around “irresponsible” childless women, who have little chance of surviving an ideological battle between ideographs when the opponent is the “innocent baby” (a highly successful pro-life riff on the figure of The Child) offered by the opposition.

In particular, I want to devote attention to the self-presentation of Shantae, 35, from Oregon. When examining the “candid” story of a woman’s personal history, we might want to counter the idea that she is implicated in the construction of a rhetorically sly “narrative.” Isn’t such a woman just speaking her truth and telling us “what happened”? Shantae’s story, in addition to telling “what happened,” demonstrates how personal narratives destined for moderately pro-choice (or choice ambivalent) audiences on the web engage in predictable patterns of self-aware political positioning. In other

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6 In Press and Cole’s analysis of pro-choice middle class women, they also found that their “muddled middle” group were particularly suspicious of “decisions they felt were irresponsible” (110).
words, how Shantae tells her story is just as important as what she chooses to tell. The medium heavily reinforces the message in this case, allowing for a visual emphasis on certain features: the photograph that accompanies the article wordlessly invokes The Child that Shantae will multiply in her story, pop-out quotes draw the eye to an act of temporal distancing that I will read below, and links are helpfully included to the article-supporting Guttmacher statistics, but are notably absent leading to any examples of the stories of irresponsible young women who are purportedly getting too much of our attention.

In a stand-alone line midway through her story, which is bracketed by white space in order to catch the eye of skimming readers, Shantae writes: “I terminated my pregnancy 10 years ago. Now I have two more biological children and two stepsons — a total of six kiddos.” The chronology of her children’s births, her unexpected pregnancy, her abortion at Planned Parenthood, and her later empowering involvement in reproductive health advocacy with other women of color in her community have already been documented in the story’s earlier paragraphs. This spatially emphasized reiteration of the timing of events serves to distance Shantae temporally from the abortion, insulating her “real” life story from stigma. It also distances her from the terms of what the journalist has already identified as the “standard narrative” in which abortion is seen as essentially opposite to motherhood. It may, or may not, be important to Shantae’s abortion experience that she later became a step-parent to her spouse’s children. But by choosing to include them, she is able to offer her “total of six kiddos” as irrefutable proof of allegiance to politically legible values, or, as Condit writes in her analysis of Sherri Finkbine’s story, to show that she is not “against motherhood.”
Press and Cole noted a strikingly similar act of distancing in the personal stories of abortion told by their middle class interviewees: “the moment when the choice was made or considered was seen as ‘apart’ from their ‘real’ life, a temporary aberration from which their return to material or psychological ‘normality’ was swift” (109). In fact, the women in Press and Cole’s study framed abortion not only as a “temporary” and “aberrant” detour from normalcy, but one which, in order to be justifiable, must have been in service to their larger, more legible narratives of successful reproductive futurism. Such aberrations were retroactively justified as having facilitated the reinstatement of a correct lifecourse which lead to family and children. In other words, Shantae’s ultimate “6 kiddos” are a clear futurist telos which amply justify, in maternal, responsible terms, her earlier reproductive healthcare choices. Similar to the work of the original “good” abortion-seeking woman, Sherri Finkbine, on a children’s television program called Romper Room, there is something especially colloquial, friendly, and inviting in Shantae’s use of the word “kiddos.” Like the reported number of kiddos, the word itself telegraphs an abundance of enthusiasm for The Child, supercharging Shantae’s character type as “Mom” into a kind of ideal, if overdetermined, representation.

In addition, Shantae, who identifies herself as a woman of color, and who describes her fulfilling reproductive rights advocacy work with other women of color, must navigate between two extremes of representation in order to take up the mantle of appropriate, socially desirable motherhood even as she discloses a story of abortion. “Race,” Dorothy Roberts writes in Killing the Black Body, “has historically determined the value society places on a woman’s right to choose motherhood” (182). Roberts
explains the multiple ways of doing responsible femininity “wrong” that Shantae can be seen navigating in her careful narrative self-presentation: “While the media portray irresponsible Black women as overly fertile,” Roberts explains, they simultaneously depict “selfish, career-seeking white women as not fertile enough” (270). As a woman explaining and re-contextualizing her abortion choice, Shantae seeks to avoid the stigma of selfishness by presenting her “total of 6 kiddos.” At the same time, she carefully qualifies the meaning of this number so that it does not swing to the other “socially undesirable” spectrum and become “irresponsible” over-fertility; she points out that two of her “kiddos” are stepsons whom she has adopted. Again, the inclusion of this detail—necessary to show commitment to parenting, yet necessarily qualified to show controlled, responsible use of one’s fertility—illustrates one way in which the terms and tropes of racist, classist hetero-patriarchy cannot be borrowed without exerting their own disciplinary control over the way that women present, and think about, their options and choices. Throughout the piece, Shantae employs other narrative strategies which repeat this bid for carefully modulated representativeness.

In a second notable move from the “candidly” personal to the strategically political, Shantae also generalizes her experience to other women. She suggests that, “when mothers are thinking about terminating a pregnancy, it is often out of love and consideration of how your family is functioning at that moment, and trying to figure out…is it fair to the children I currently have if I'm not able to provide all the things that I would like to for them” (“I’m a Mother”). Several things stand out about this generalization. The storyteller starts with “mothers,” shifts to “you” and “your family,” and ends up back with the “I’m not able” and “I would like” that are presumably the
personal basis of her speculation. She clearly positions her experience as a representative one by suggesting that choices about abortion are “often” based on the maternal and familial factors which she herself considered, mirroring Filipovic’s subtle assumption about what “most” women think, in the introduction.

In *Queering Reproduction*, Laura Mamo describes interviews with lesbian moms and their partners about their experiences with artificial insemination technologies. She points out that, in speaking informally about their experiences, the women overwhelmingly fell into a speech pattern in which they used the second person to describe their own motives. That is, they described their own thoughts and feelings with such phrases as “you tend to think” or “you start to feel.” Mamo describes this rhetorical quirk as part of a cultural script that allows women to generalize in the terms they are familiar with, and can borrow from the narratives they have read and encountered. Using the word *you*, Mamo suggests, is also a way for the narrators to signal that, when they talk about themselves, they are talking about a culturally agreed-upon ideal—an “appropriate” or “conventional” user of certain services (166). In the context of abortion, then, Shantae’s use of the second person designates her belief that she is an appropriate representational figure of the abortion-seeking woman. Once again, it is important to note that she is not simply telling her story; she is complicit in a strategic narrative representation, set up by Filipovic’s introduction, which aims to change the public face of choice.

Shantae goes on to write that “the messages we get are that women who have abortions are selfish, they just don't want to have this baby, they want to play and hang out” (“I’m a Mother”). Like Filipovic’s gesture toward an unsatisfactory “standard
narrative,” Shantae identifies a problematic set of “messages we get” and seeks to distance herself (and by extension the majority of women who have abortions) from such messages. I will return later to more closely examine the particular role of the word “selfish” in these narratives as the opposite of a socially or maternally responsible futurism. Here, I also want to draw attention to Shantae’s dismissal of “don’t want to have this baby” with a trivializing “just,” and especially to her use of the word “play.” Differentiating herself from women who “want to play and hang out” recalls the structure of reasoning which Katha Pollitt dismisses as “pleasure and convenience” (30). “Hang out” especially suggests the unambitious opposite of a teleological maternity in which abortion decisions make sense and are “normal” because they ultimately facilitate the temporally appropriate creation of a heteronormative family. Edelman suggests that queerness is powerful because it enacts a “stubborn denial of teleology” (27). If, he writes, “there is no baby and, in consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (13). Casting “play” and “pleasure” as trivial, unconvincing, and not truly representational motivations recalls Edelman’s linking of the queer subject to the drives of a jouissance that has ‘no point’ within futurist logics. In my second example, questions of temporal queering and the inevitable future anteriority of motherhood become even more pronounced.

**Parents Straightens Out Queer Time**

The online piece from *Parents* magazine is titled almost identically to the *Cosmo* piece: “I’m a Mom, and I Had an Abortion.” Like the first example, this article takes its
click-bait title from nowhere in the real narratives of the women featured. It creates, instead, a representative confessing woman, who, as in the first example, introduces us to her maternity first, and her abortion second. This way, her choice unfolds within the context of normalcy created by the ideologically powerful identity category of “Mom.” In fact, the composite or representational nature of the women in the Parents story is made explicit; in introducing the women's histories, writer Phoebe Zerwick asserts that “These women represent millions of others like them: fellow mothers on the soccer field, at the PTA meeting, or beside you at work” (emphasis added). As in Filipovic’s Cosmo preamble, the moral and representative majority of these “millions” is emphasized. This introduction, which encourages readers to generalize broader implications from the handful of individual stories collected in the article, elaborates on the ideological context for choice implied by the “mom”-hood of the title. Women who have abortions (in the millions!) are placed against the normalizing background of the “soccer field,” the communally-inflected “PTA meeting,” and, perhaps most forcefully, “beside you.” As in Shantae’s personal use of the second person in the Cosmo example, journalist Zerwick’s strategic “you” attempts to position the reader in an ideologically complicit community; it encourages the article’s audience to accept the women in question as the appropriate users of the choice paradigm.

Zerwick’s tagline for the collection is “Five Brave Women share their stories with Parents.” Here, though, the stories appear in third person, mostly presented by the journalist, with intermittent quotes from the women, who appear in photographs above their stories, with their children. The piece opens with an infographic: six yellow stick figure women and four white, accompanied by the words “Nearly 6 in 10 women who
have abortions are mothers.” The author elaborates on the graphic, citing the same Guttmacher study found in the *Cosmo* example. Zerwick, like Filipovic, sets a pro-choice rhetorical scene in which mothers remain “largely unseen” as the imagined women who have abortions. She writes that “an assumption persists that abortion services are used largely by teenage girls and young, childless women. But mothers are in fact the majority of patients” (“I’m a Mom”). Just as the *Cosmo* story dismissed the “standard narrative” and the “messages we get” as false and unpersuasive, this article seeks to reorient pro-choice narratives away from an “assumption” of youth and childlessness, and to centralize mothers as the moral and visible majority.

“Many of these women *know what it means* to be a parent,” Zerwick writes, “and when they become pregnant unexpectedly, they think about what another child would mean for their family” (“I’m a Mom” emphasis added). In the terms of Edelman's analysis of meaning-making, this line suggests that parenthood or motherhood are the positions with the most privileged access to meaning, because they contribute to the production of the future children on whom meaning is predicated. Edelman also writes that the politics of reproductive futurism are often implicit, considered too self-evident to require articulation or defense: we all know what parenthood means—don’t we? In fact, Zerwick does not attempt to say “what it means.” Neither does Katha Pollitt in making a remarkably similar point:

Isn’t it a good thing that women think carefully about *what it means* to bring a child into this world—what, for example, *it means* to the children she already has? We tend to think of abortion as anti-child and anti-motherhood…Actually, abortion is part of being a mother and of caring for children, because part of
caring for children is knowing when it’s not a good idea to bring them into the world. (17, emphasis added)

Pollitt uses a more specific meaning (“what it means to the children”) as her “example” of what it means to make a child. This loop of deferred meanings perhaps attempts to emphasize in its odd, repetitious way that children are meaningful. It probably would not surprise Edelman that the definition of meaning turns out to be another postponement toward “what it means to the children.” I also want to note that Pollitt replicates a significant move found in the Parents article by linking meaning (and the meaningfulness of children) to time. In the next example I will consider here, temporality is manipulated in interesting ways to produce the correct (that is, maternal and futurist) “meaning” for the story.

Zerwick’s introduction to the collection of stories also mentions #ShoutYourAbortion by name, but in an interesting appropriation of its project. She first argues that maternal narratives, like those she presents in the article, are unjustly and misleadingly overshadowed by stories of careless young women. Then, she writes that women are increasingly “sharing their experiences to destigmatize abortion, such as with the grassroots hashtag campaign #ShoutYourAbortion.” Certainly #Shout was envisioned as a platform for the destigmatization of all sorts of abortion stories, making a visible space for happy and sad, certain and uncertain, self-focused prerogatives and family planning decisions. But to suggest that #ShoutYourAbortion was engaged in un-silencing or making visible mothers, specifically, seems to misleadingly domesticate the more radical terms of, for example, Bonow’s first Tweet, which asked explicitly, “why wouldn’t I be happy that I was not forced to become a mother?” To introduce the
individual stories that make up the body of the article, Zerwick performs what Lynn Chancer calls “a swift linguistic disappearing act” (115). She writes: “to understand what goes into *a woman’s* decision to terminate a pregnancy, *Parents* interviewed *mothers* from across the country” (emphasis added). Presenting the methodology this way neatly essentializes “woman” as “mother,” again suggesting that on questions of representation, “mothers” can sufficiently speak for all women.

Each story that follows is accompanied by a photograph of the woman, most of whom are accompanied by a child or children, trading on what Edelman calls the “disciplinary image” of the child (19). It may be inarguably difficult to look at such images and think of these women as “selfish,” “irresponsible” people who just want to “hang out;” but such loaded images also trade on a dangerously familiar understanding of women as best contextualized or realized when surrounded by a family. Using dominant ideologies to create a convincing characterization is never a neutral strategy; rather, it risks reifying the very ideologies it trades on for recognition. As Condit warns, in seeking to persuade others, the persuaders themselves can also be persuaded by the terms and ideologies from which they borrow (200). Before we even start reading the story of Hannah from Minneapolis, we are greeted by a photograph of her with her husband and four children—one of whom gives a double thumbs up to the camera. Hanna’s story is important to my analysis because it performs a number of elaborate narrative contortions in order to manipulate the way that a reader receives revelations about Hannah’s multiple abortions. Because Zerwick has interviewed Hannah and then written the story in order to “best” represent her, the constructed nature of the narrative especially stands out. We cannot know whether Hannah herself told her story in chronological order; the
manipulation of the timeline which I look at below might be her own, Zerwick’s, or a collaboration. What is clear is that the odd presentation which results is intended to have a certain impact on the readers of *Parents*.

In the journalist’s introduction, she writes that in addition to current moms who chose abortion, “others had an abortion at a younger age, knowing that someday, when they were more settled in their lives, they would want children” (“I’m a Mom”). A similar pop out quote from Hannah’s story serves a sort of sub-title to the section: “I knew I wanted to have children, just not at 22.” This type of qualifying statement is one that I found appearing ubiquitously across stories of abortion which present themselves as aggressively “normal” in their fights for normalization. It serves to reaffirm, even as it recounts a specific denial of maternity, an ultimate allegiance to pronatalist political frameworks, thus contextualizing any revelations that follow safely within more legible frameworks. Hannah’s story, as it is presented to readers, begins in the summer of 2012, when Hannah’s twins have just been weaned, and she discovers she is pregnant again and decides to terminate the pregnancy. When the journalist quotes Hannah, it is to give voice to a generalization from herself outward to the proposed “millions” the story gestured to in the article’s opening: “If *you* have kids and are faced with an unexpected pregnancy, *you’re* thinking about the kids *you* have and what *you* wouldn’t be able to give them” (“I’m a Mom,” emphasis added). As in Shantae’s story, Hannah universalizes her experience using the second person, and implicates the reader in shared values-based decision making, positioning herself as a standard, normal, and appropriate spokeswoman for the cause. Because most of Hannah’s story is told by Zerwick, in the third person,
this direct quote is useful in showing that, like Shantae, Hannah is also actively participating in the strategic positioning and politicization of her story.

The temporal contortion that follows is the reason I find Hannah’s example so compelling. After the section summarized above, the article unexpectedly goes back in time to review Hannah’s initial struggles with infertility, and her happiness at being able to have her first child, second child, and twins. The article introduces the teleological story of desire for children followed by arrival of children, and only then dives further back in time to reveal that Hannah also had another, pre-motherhood abortion: “As much as Hannah longed for children, there had been a time in her life when she didn’t. When she and Patrick were engaged, she had her first abortion.” Here, the past perfect creates a kind of doubly-sealed off time capsule of queer temporality. The qualifying statement firmly separates the Hannah we know now (and see in the image surrounded by children) from the Hannah who “had her first abortion.” Like the spatial highlighting of “I terminated my pregnancy 10 years ago” in Shantae’s narrative, this strange double-back and reveal of an additional abortion recalls Press and Cole’s idea of abortion as a “temporary aberration” which is “apart” from a woman’s sense of her “real life” (109). As Edelman explains, this is “the logic of a temporality that always serves to ‘straighten’ out, and thus proclaims the universality of reproductive futurism” (26). Here, this “straightening out” serves to narratively produce Hannah as always already a mother, and thus, always sympathetic, legible, and worthy of representation.

Hannah’s longing for children is affirmed in stark contrast to that other time, distantly phrased as “there had been a time in her life.” That is, the other time is only revealed after the reader has been assured of the trajectory of Hannah’s real life, the one
in which she longs for children, struggles to get pregnant, and creates a large-ish family. 
It is also not incidental that, as in several of the other examples I’ve considered here, a kind of ideological softening blow makes up the first clause of the sentence, pointing out that Hannah’s abortion took place “when she and Patrick were engaged.” By including this information as context, Zerwick signals that it is relevant to the choice that followed; even Hannah’s younger, childless reproductive choices were, ultimately, made in the developing narrative context of the hetero-reproductive family.

If introducing one’s child(ren) is the easiest and most convincing way to reify motherhood (think Shantae’s “total of 6 kiddos” and the absolving thumbs-ups of Hannah’s twins), I also argue that it is not the only way. Future imagined children are also a common, and potent, device in the abortion narratives of younger women, as Hannah’s story-within-the-story begins to illustrate. In these cases, the stated commitment to the (eventual) Child performs almost the same function as “real” children do—promising, if not proving, that the woman in question makes all of her decisions in a spirit of responsibility to future others. In other words, the endlessly reproduced “narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child” (Edelman 21) also narratively reproduces the future anterior mother, who always will-have-been The Mother whose meaning is defined by the child of the future. If women are always already mothers for purposes of being more sympathetic or representative, then pro-choice authors need to be aware they they cannot simply cast off this strategic imbrication outside of its context of rhetorical usefulness.

Qualifying statements like the tagline from Hannah’s story in Parents (“I knew I wanted to have children, just not at 22”) constitute a more nuanced move is both
demonstrably a play for normalization, and dangerous in its tendency to re-integrate “motherhood” and “femaleness.” If all women—or at least all “normal” women—make their decisions by situating themselves as eventual mothers, then such narratives are at least comfortable implying that all women and persons with uteruses are potential mothers—are, in fact, already thinking “as” mothers. Thus, the hetero-reproductive family pulls enormous rhetorical weight even when it is a hypothetical family. This replacement of the real, named, photographed child with the imagined, hypothetical child is possible, because, as Edelman might argue—The Child and the The Family are always aspirational, disciplinary images which establish and police the possible framework of the politically sayable. Here, as in Condit’s example of how women’s wants were transmuted for greater rhetorical effectiveness into unwanted children, a pattern of thinking is reinforced in which the image-inary family is far more potent a rhetorical mainstay than the real and existing woman herself, especially when the impolitic word “self” is always unfavorably shadowed by its adjectival evil twin, “selfish.”

The strangely compulsory future anterior in which every woman makes decisions as the mother who will have been thinking of her future child(ren) becomes even more pronounced when pro-choice writers discuss the motives of childless abortion-seeking women. An example of this is Pollitt, whose tone and stated project are passionately feminist and pro-choice, but who ultimately implies that women are able to “think carefully” about abortion because they have special access to the meaning-making lens of care and responsibility to children they have or will have in the future (17). As another illustration, we can consider how Aplus.com curated its listicle of Tweets inspired by #ShoutYourAbortion, choosing examples which primarily framed abortion as “part of”
being a mother who considers The Child as “the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics” (Edelman 3). For example, user “bunby” Tweeted “I could not have given that child the life it deserved. I would not have been the mother I want to be,” while “Ruby of Manocide” took an especially teleological approach, writing that “In 1988 a late-term abortion got a teenage me back on track for college, career, & motherhood.” The idea of motherhood as track reinforces the seeming inevitability of “bunby’s” striking temporal construction “would not have been the mother I want to be.” Not all women frame their stories this way, but a move like Pollitt’s, seeking to “contextualize” abortion within, or as the responsible practice of, motherhood and family, is especially insidious because it can be applied even to narratives where different, queerer prerogatives are explored. In my final chapter, I will look at a few examples of pro-choice commenters online who, when confronted with explicitly non-maternal decision making frameworks, attempted to explain how they were still proof that “part of caring for children is knowing when it’s not a good idea to bring them into the world”; indeed, that any story of abortion inevitably proves such “knowledge” and “care” on the part of all women, who presumably are on the unavoidable “track” that “Ruby of Manocide” describes.

As becomes clear in these examples, casting the responsible mother who makes family-centered decisions as the typical woman who has an abortion can work in two main ways. First, these stories affirm women’s choice-making “context” as the teleological project of creating a family. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they actively identify and reject “childless,” “irresponsible,” and “selfish” ways of being and deciding as not normal and not representative. As Edelman suggests in his critique of the
endlessly elastic liberal center, the marginalized (“women who have abortions”) can indeed move toward the heterofuturist center (“mothers”), but only “by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else” (27). But, as Edelman warns, “repudiations of that figural identity” may be effective at expanding rights for some, but can also reify the norm against which figural queerness is defined. As we see in Filipovic, Shantae, and Zerwick’s attempts to otherize considerations like “play” and “selfishness,” they are willing to shift the queerness or “stigma” (Filipovic) that they see adhering to abortion onto these other women. Perhaps, in seeking to hold on to legality and (increasingly patchy) access, more conservative pro-choice advocates find themselves asking, as Edelman does in deep sarcasm, “who would, after all, come out for abortion or stand against reproduction, against futurity, and so against life?” (16). This figurally queered and otherized “who,” and the ways that mainstream pro-choice communities publically reject her in hopes of greater legibility, will be the focus of my next chapter.
NONNORMATIVE TELEOLOGIES AND THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

My second chapter featured journalists and storytellers who feared that young, irresponsible, and childless women were taking up too much of the available public imagination. By casting such women as non-representative both numerically and ideologically, the two articles used persuasive storytelling to make the case that abortion can, and should, constitute the practice of responsible, normal motherhood that is desirable not only in the lives of women, but also as a clear social good that can be recognized by broader audiences. In this chapter, I will consider alternate models for representation. The stories included here attempt to produce and discursively participate in a pro-choice community in which no representation is unwelcome or unthinkable. These storytellers make it clear that they are aware of the justificatory, apologetic narrative type that I considered in the last chapter. Like Shantae and Hannah, the childless, unapologetic women whose stories I consider here tell us “what happened” and how they felt about it, but also move into explicitly persuasive territory. They address themselves to the larger pro-choice community and point out its various failures of inclusivity. The writers call out the tropes and storytelling vocabularies of “good” abortion narratives, and offensive-ly perform their exceptionality to those frameworks of meaning and legibility.

“Happy” and the Stubborn Denial of Teleology

Amelia Bonow’s Facebook post, which I included in my first chapter, became the foundation of #ShoutYourAbortion when Lindy West Tweeted an image of the post and added the hashtag for the first time. Within the month, the two women had each written their own long-form narratives for the websites of Salon and The Guardian, respectively.
Bonow’s narrative elaborates on the sentiments of her Facebook post, and continues its critical project of naming and challenging the rhetorical moves of apologetic or justificatory abortion stories. One of the important changes related to the medium of publication for these public speech acts is the increased democratization of the web. It’s important to consider that the women considered in this chapter are all college-educated, roughly millennial white women. Certainly, not every woman with a culturally queered story to tell has such ready access to guest post invites from Salon and The Guardian; on the other hand, online publication and self-publication through blogging, Tweeting, and hashtagging has significantly increased the potential for visibility and circulation of “other” stories. When Condit performed her analysis in 1990, for example, access and interactivity were both far more constrained than in the cases I will examine here. Magazine readers could perhaps write in to ongoing columns with their opinions, but had no guarantee of being chosen by the editor. Part of what I want to focus on in this chapter is the exponentially increased potential for community discourse negotiations found in online features like links to related and opposing content, the community-finding power of hashtags, and most importantly, comments which allow for interactivity with texts and with other users of a text.

Online journalists are often unable to chose their own headlines, but it’s interesting that in this case, the title is actually something Bonow writes, verbatim, in her story. She has also written the article herself, rather than telling her story to a reporter. And while she engages in a literary and intentional self-presentation, it is emphatically not a politically cautious one. The title of her story for Salon, “My abortion made me happy: The story that started the #ShoutYourAbortion movement,” contrasts with the
repeated structure I outlined in the last chapter, in which a first phrase (“I’m a mother and…” or “When she and Peter were engaged…”)) worked to soften and contextualize the abortion revelations that were usually positioned in the second half of a sentence. For Bonow’s *Salon* piece, the abortion is announced first, without a justificatory or ameliorating context to “appropriately” contain it. Her narrative continues to follow this gesture throughout, proclaiming in its very first paragraph:

I am not going to explain the circumstances surrounding how and why I got pregnant, although the situation was strange. Often, women buffer the disclosure of their abortion with details that are meant to act as a justification for the procedure. Sometimes, when a woman gives you the back story, she is saying: “please continue to respect me even though I had the abortion I am about to tell you about, because it was not the bad kind of abortion and I am not the bad kind of woman.” (“Happy”)

Here, Bonow actually identifies the particular buffering-of-discourse move which I repeatedly noted in the *Cosmo* and *Parents* pieces. She also engages directly with the rhetorical processes that shape our understanding of these narratives by offering her own critical reading of the ideologies that more ambivalent or defensive rhetoric can telegraph. She challenges the idea that there are good and bad abortions. Her introduction also shows an awareness that, as Press and Cole wrote, “considerations such as the suffering individual women experienced in making their decisions or the relative carelessness of the sexual behavior leading to their pregnancies” is often central to evaluations of moral legitimacy (23). While this parsing and sorting may legitimize and
normalize the types of inoffensive stories Bonow calls out, and work to lessen their stigma, it does so by transferring the stigma of being “the bad kind of woman” to others.

The subtitle of Bonow’s article continues this direct interrogation of defensive, choice-ambivalent authorial moves, beginning: “We’ve been brainwashed to think we must regret our abortions.” Considered against Shantae’s comments on “the messages we get” from pro-choice stories, Bonow’s assertion offers a competing version of what the “standard” narrative is, who it silences or marginalizes, and how it might be accomplishing this. Both women are concerned with how public rhetoric is influencing the way women can think and act, and both women tell their stories in a bid to intervene in the process of normalization. In other words, a public negotiation of meaning takes places between women who believe that the maternal decision making frameworks of abortion-seeking women are too often silenced, and should be foregrounded in conversations so that we think of them first, and those who see narratives of regret, shame, and self-justification overrepresented in “our” thinking.

Throughout her story, Bonow continues to define terms and concepts differently from the way they were presented in the Cosmo and Parents narratives. For example, the temporal markers that steer desire back toward the “track” of future anterior maternity are notably absent from her phrasing. She defines abortion as “what happens when a woman becomes pregnant and does not wish to procreate.” The full stop is striking in contrast to Hannah’s story in Parents, which created multiple temporal loops so that the narrative stressed Hannah’s long-standing desire for children, and linguistically sealed off the “time in her life” when she had (briefly!) not wished to procreate. Even the phrasing specifically draws attention to time: an abortion is what happens “when” pregnancy
meets the temporally unbounded “not wish” to procreate. In her story for Salon, Bonow creates a noticeable exception to the trend of highlighting temporal aberration from the maternal timeline; she allows the “not wish” above to exist without qualifiers like right now, or at that time in her life, which would reinscribe this aberrant “not wish” back into a timeline ultimately controlled by the “wish to procreate.” Bonow’s closing line is a reminder to women that “it’s perfectly reasonable to feel happy that you were not forced to become a mother.” Like the sentence in which she redefines abortion, this statement has no temporal caveat; Bonow does not tell women that they can feel happy not to become a mother before they were ready or when they wouldn’t have been the best mother. Instead, she performs what I consider a radical rhetorical act in the context of narratives like the Cosmo and Parents examples: she allows a moment of queer, non-teleological time, and does not rush to re-inscribe it within the “familiar familial” timeline that confers legibility.

Bonow’s narrative is also longer than most of the more maternally framed examples I reviewed. She elaborates on the time in between taking a pregnancy test and getting her procedure, and explicitly flouts sombre, responsible tonal conventions. She describes having stolen her pregnancy test, laughing with her friends over the awkwardness of the test sitting on a coffee table, having great sex with her boyfriend, and, perhaps most notably for my thesis’s specific terms, taking a hedonistic weekend roadtrip to Palm Springs with two of her best gay male friends. The focus on pleasure, fun, and what Shantae dismissively termed “play” and “hanging out” is not only emphasized in raucous, sensual, and humorous detail, but marked by the overt queerness of Bonow’s chosen road trip companions, whom she describes as uniquely “capable of
flippant darkness” as well as “intuitive, complex emotional support.” The appearance of
the jouissance of the road trip in conjunction with the gay best friends in Bonow’s story
draws attention to the ways in which her narrative pointedly refuses to be read as it
“should” be (that is, within maternal or futurist structures of time, heteronormativity, and
meaning-making). Edelman writes that queerness can “figure the radical dissolution of
the contract, in every sense social and Symbolic, on which the future as putative
assurance against the jouissance of the Real depends” (16). Here, Bonow’s temporally
unqualified sentences, and descriptions of laughter, sexuality, and road tripping (a
wandering journey with no “point” other than fun), express this non-teleological,
momentary “real,” as opposed to the future-dependent symbolic.

Bonow goes on to call the abortion procedure itself less painful than “flossing my
teeth when it’s been awhile,” and elaborates on her feelings of community and gratitude
toward the patients and nurses at the Planned Parenthood she visits. She ends, though, by
writing that she has no wish to invalidate the “feelings of fear, or ambivalence, or
sadness, or regret” that other women may experience, because all reactions “belong to the
women who feel them.” This is in marked contrast to the way that Filipovic, Shantae,
and Zerwick all sought to strengthen the political convincingness of their narratives by
invalidating the visibility or legibility of irresponsible, childless, or playful women and
their experiences. However, Bonow does make her own bid to change what she calls the
“social conditioning” of women to feel and to express shame. “I’m telling you my story
plainly, proudly, flippantly even,” Bonow writes, “because we have all been brainwashed
to believe that the absence of negative emotions around having an abortion is the mark of
an emotionally bankrupt person.” She is transparent and self-aware about her narrative
acts, making both her methods (“I’m telling you my story”) and her motivation (“we have been brainwashed”) explicit, while using pronouns that suggest she is speaking to what Condit defines as an in-group audience; if the Cosmo and Parents pieces were written in order to de-emphasize abortion stories which are conspicuously missing the markers of inevitable maternity, then Bonow’s pronouns here make it clear that she recognizes the illegibility of her motivations by such standards, yet seeks to expand the available pro-choice vocabularies to make a place for herself and her narrative within the legible range of such a community’s discourse.

“Joyful” and the Teleology of the Self

Kristen Brown’s personal narrative for Fusion, where she works as a staff technology reporter, is similar to Bonow’s in several ways. If Bonow lets readers know in her final paragraph that she has been proud and flippant as a deliberate strategy, Brown sends a similar message by heading her article with a giant gif of celebratory emojis: alternating patterns of champagne bottles, confetti hats, sunglass faces, and hands raised in praise. In other words, she emphasizes youthfulness and flippancy. Brown’s title, “I had an abortion and it was a totally joyful experience,” also recalls Bonow’s emphasis, in her original Facebook post, on how abortion made her “happy in a totally unqualified way” (emphasis added). Both Bonow’s “totally unqualified” and Brown’s “totally joyful” are explicit rejections of muddled middle or choice-ambivalent ways of thinking, speaking, and strategizing politically. I consider it likely that Brown wrote her own title, because her entire piece is composed in order to reflect upon the title’s surprising or unexpected promise, and to conclude with a line that emphasizes that it was not a misnomer or a gimmick. In the piece, Bonow describes rolling her eyes when she read
the comments of anti-abortion lawyer Allan Parker Jr., who was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying that “the abortion industry is trying to make it sound like abortion is a joyful experience” (qtd. in Brown). Her final line, “I would call it a joy,” calls back to Parker Jr. and to her title, redefining her abortion experience in a defiant and unexpected way.

Unlike Bonow, Brown *does* elaborate on the circumstances that led to her accidental pregnancy; in fact, she uses this stock phase of the narrative to fight stigma and respectability politics in a different way—she unapologetically details her own irresponsibility. By noting all the ways in which she was irresponsible, yet ended up with a “joyful” outcome anyway, she stakes an important claim to legal abortion rights—and social abortion de-stigmatization—regardless of how “good” or “bad” the woman is by standards of responsibility, respectability, and, of course, reproductive futurism that measures decisions by their effect on a future community of imagined others. Brown writes matter-of-factly about joining *OkCupid* and meeting “a nice enough guy” whom she doesn’t want to date seriously because it’s “clear that he was rapidly heading toward settling down.” In other words, she explicitly rejects a life trajectory or “track” that would have contained her story within the bounds of hetero-reproductive family creation; she doesn’t want to “settle down.”

She further details drinking too much, and, though she doesn’t want to date him, calling the *OkCupid* match. She explains matter-of-factly “being too out of it to effectively protest” when he does not want to use a condom. Later, after discovering her accidental pregnancy, she waits for the date of her medical abortion consultation and has “nightmares that somehow the abortion didn’t take, leaving me stuck with a baby I didn’t
want.” After briefly describing an uneventful medical abortion at home, she elaborates on the nature of her wants and decision-making framework in the situation:

I had imagined, in distressing detail, the life that I had planned for myself completely unraveling. But I had handled the situation and taken back command of my own body and life. I felt powerful, as if there were no obstacle I couldn’t surmount. I felt a deep sense of freedom, knowing that my only responsibility was to myself. I was overcome with gratitude and optimism and a new-found sense of control. I felt awesome. (“Joyful,” emphasis added)

In a narrative that was attempting to appropriate the hegemonic values of futurist respectability, such repetitions of a teleology-of-myself would be unacceptable; by emphasizing plans for herself and responsibility to herself, Brown flouts the imperative to frame a lifecourse logic that primarily considers The Child or The Family as future retroactive justifications.

Brown also includes a rhetorical move that is the opposite of the Cosmo and Parents articles exclusionary straw-women arguments: “Certainly, for some women, the decision to get an abortion is difficult and going through with it can be equally traumatic. For me, though, it was neither.” Like Bonow, envisioning a pro-choice discourse community in which her narrative could be legible does not require de-legitimizing other stories or other frameworks for decision-making. She emphasizes that her abortion allowed her to “become the person that I wanted to be,” again placing the self, not the eventual family or the eventual realization of successful, well-timed motherhood, as the telos guiding her decisions. Her final line re-engages the story’s title and, based on the foregoing evidence, makes a claim to re-define the possible vocabularies for talking
about choice: “I think I would call it a joy.” The defense of the possibility (thinkability and speakability of) “joy,” recalling Edelman’s discussion of jouissance, is linked repeatedly back to the self, which in these narratives always risks implying the selfish that more conservative narratives foreclose and reject. This is in contrast to the logic of reproductive futurism, in which the self becomes a “mere prosthesis maintaining the future for the figural Child” (Edelman 30). The person who is “wanted” in the future, or in consideration of whom reproductive choices “will have been” made, Brown makes clear, is herself. Both the Salon and Fusion examples, above, come from younger, childless women. They are interesting because they seem to self-consciously perform the identity categories from which the more maternally-focused narratives in Cosmo and Parents sought to distance themselves. Rhetorically cautious pro-choice writers would prefer women like Bonow and Brown to be the exceptional and remote straw-women against whom to define a pro-choice movement that is legible to futurist respectability politics, but the two examples above show that play, pleasure, and “sterile, narcissistic enjoyments” (Edelman 13) remain stubbornly real, thinkable, and even shout-able aspects in the lives of women.

In this section, I will turn to a snapshot of the ongoing negotiations over meanings and strategies that are taking place in online pro-choice communities. In explaining the methods behind her own analysis of the rhetoric surrounding abortion, Condit laments the “ephemeral” nature of public speech acts (12). In the comments sections available under the Salon and Fusion articles, readers can respond to the article, and also respond to one another’s responses. Commenters engage in extended debates about the meanings of choice, abortion, and womanhood, and offer surprisingly astute critiques about the impact
of moral legitimacy and respectability on a message’s political effectiveness. They negotiate what it means to be pro-choice, staking claims to membership in the identity group while calling into question the rights of others to speak for or about the issues at hand. In the sampling of comments below, we see a continuation of Filipovic and Zerwick’s impulse to downplay what I have described as queerer subjectivities that do not imagine all decisions within frameworks of eventual maternity. First, I will point out a distinct, repeated qualifying move that I found in the comments on the stories told by Bonow and Brown.

“While I fully support your right, I fully detest your attitude”: the Community Responds

Many commenters on the two stories make statements that are variations on the following basic qualification structure: “I’m pro-choice, but.” This statement is followed by various critiques which sever the playful or irresponsible narrative from what the commenter sees as normally or acceptably pro-choice frameworks. For example, reader “Old Shaman” says of Bonow, “I am totally pro-choice but this chick, I don't believe her” (emphasis added). The emphasis on believability is especially important, because it again returns the conversation to questions of who is legible to the community. Gary Steeley writes to Brown personally: “I am pro-choice as it gets but I also feel you being with a guy who you didn't want to be with in the first place was totally irresponsible” (emphasis added). The focus on irresponsibility, of course, suggests an attempt to enforce the rejection of queerer, less futurist-legible stories. On Brown’s article, Barbara Smith-Groves writes, “I am pro-choice, and know of many women who have had abortions. Never, not ever did they say it was joyful. You are psycho.” Kim Gallagher from
California asserts that she is pro-choice *three times* in her lengthy comment: “I respect your right to make that decision, but I am appalled that you find joy in it. Yeah, yeah, I'm 'judgey,' a hater, whatever else. Look, I'm pro-choice, and I understand your feelings.” After several other thoughts, she reiterates, “I AM pro-choice. I have had an abortion, as a teenager 30 years ago.” This last claim is especially interesting because, like the *Cosmo* and *Parents* examples in Chapter 2, it performs a temporal separation or sealing off of an aberrant moment in one’s otherwise legible and respectable life. Taken together, these commenters seem to heavily overstate their self-identification within the pro-choice cohort; Kim Gallagher uses all caps and repetition, while Gary Steeley is as “pro-choice as it gets.” On the basis of their emphatically stated belonging, the commenters feel justified in (perhaps even responsible to) police the borders of what is acceptable and legible in a pro-choice position as they define it. In this way, such commenters claim membership in the pro-choice community for themselves and for what Bonow calls “the good sort of woman,” while casting doubt on the whether young, childless, irreverent women like Bonow and Brown can claim the same belonging or political legibility.

User “stevejump” says of Bonow’s piece that “this is the kind of cavalier shallowness that gives many pro-choicers (like me) the creeps,” generalizing from himself and his own negative feelings about Bonow’s narrative to “many” other pro-choice people. It is important to note that he, and other commenters, move from the public and visible realm of words, stories, and reactions, into attempts to intervene in or regulate the private thoughts and feelings of pro-choice women. On Kristen Brown’s article, Meg Villarose-Kelly from Philadelphia (a frequent commenter and replier on this
thread) says “sorry most people don't think this way and shouldn't.” As with user “stevejump,” and the over-generalizations toward “most” or “many” made in Filipovic and Zerwick’s articles, Ms. Villarose-Kelly’s “most” creates a futurist, apologetic center and seeks to marginalize flippant, less teleological narratives from that space. Ed Moorehouse writes “I totally believe you should have the right to an abortion,” but adds, “you should feel bad about it,” and reiterates, “while I fully support your right to one I fully detest your attitude.” It is clearly important to Ed Moorehouse that he not be mistaken for a pro-life comments troll; he fully supports choice and fully supports rights, and on the basis of this full belonging, seeks to discipline the feeling or attitude of an abortion-seeking woman. Between these two comments, the constellation of words that appears: “think this way,” “speak of choice in such a way,” “feel bad about it,” and re-evaluate their “attitude” is significant in several ways. Press and Cole found that among their pro-choice interviewees, “only an individual woman’s feeling—indeed, her own anguish—[could] determine whether abortion would be right or wrong in her case” (13).

This cluster of concerns with thoughts, feelings, and attitudes illustrates how the terms used in public debate and discussion can influence—in fact, are expected to influence—the range of experiences that will be available to women, privately. This type of repeated regulation of what is “normal” or “realistic” to think or feel becomes the social environment in which women must make their choices.

The repetitions in these statements are also noteworthy. In many of the examples above, commenters wrote that they were pro-choice, followed by some caveat, and then repeated the statement in slightly different words, seeming to need to emphasize their pro-choice identification, as well as their ambivalence, in multiple ways. This suggests at
least some awareness of what Press and Cole describe as the contradictory nature of such choice-ambivalent positions. Because each statement is invalidated by what follows it, the commenters work through repeated not-quite-satisfying articulation of the fact that they are entirely pro-choice, but not entirely “pro” a full range of thinkable, feel-able, or speak-able choices. They thus end up in a cycle of repetitious, inconsistent self-definition. Writing of their own informants’ “problem in finding words capable of expressing a judgement,” Press and Cole note that:

Although they firmly believe that every woman should have the right to choose an abortion, or not to choose one, they argue with equal passion about whether a particular decision is ‘correct’ or ‘wrong.’ Yet their liberal language gives them no vantage point for connecting these two perspectives. They argue a radical position of individual choice that it is clear they do not fully embrace when it is moved from the abstract level and applied to an issue as concrete as particular abortion decisions, taking place in specific circumstances. (123)

Emphasizing feeling bad, anguished, or serious can demonstrate that a woman takes parenthood, children, and procreation seriously—such anguished seriousness affirms allegiance to pronatalist politics in which The Child represents the highest value and responsible decision-making in the name of the child is the way of the normal, legible citizen.

Another notable trend appeared among the subset of commenters who, rather than rejecting the playful and unapologetic narratives, attempted to include them within the future anterior logics of motherhood, regardless of whether such a reading was invited by the narrative or not. User “pjwhite” defended Bonow (sort of) by asking: “Does this 30
year old woman seem like she's ready to be a mother to you? I think she was trying to make it very clear (and succeeded) that she is not mommy material...good for her for acknowledging that!” The same user made an even more explicit move to inscribe all of pro-choice rhetoric and thought within the normalizing bounds of reproductive futurity: “I am pro-choice because I take parenthood extremely seriously,” this user wrote, “Pro-Choice is Pro-Child.” Some readers were determined to fold the respectively “happy” and “joyful” authors into thoughtful and responsible motherhood almost against their stated authorial will; “Missy Silver” from Ontario writes of Kristen Brown’s narrative: “Well written [sic] article. I am sure she will be a wonderful mother when she is ready. She has enough sense to know when she is not and didn’t [sic] choose to bring an unwanted baby into this world.” Although Brown wrote joyfully of re-establishing a lifecourse that would lead to the wanted future self, a reader like “Missy Silver” still finds it possible to infer a primary consideration of the “unwanted baby,” thus allowing her to categorize Brown within the realm of legible pronatalist “sense,” and set her on the futurist “track” toward “wonderful mother”-hood “when she is ready.” These users follow Pollitt’s gesture in reinscribing all abortion-seeking women under the expansive rubric of future-responsible mothers. Edelman describes how the figural Child alone “embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed” (11). According to this logic, even the most explicit choices against, or simply unrelated to, motherhood can always be framed as essentially maternal choices; even childfree women are making decisions against children in consideration of their hypothetical
children. This is possible because The Child Edelman’s describes, he makes clear, is never a real child, but always the disciplinary figural child.

“She is doing tremendous damage to the pro-choice cause”: the Self-Conscious Discourse Community

In my second chapter, I suggested that perceptions of persuasive power were inextricably bound up with perceptions of moral legitimacy. That is, whether consciously or not, choice ambivalent authors and commenters are especially dismissive toward narratives or decision-making frameworks that they find morally illegitimate in part because they understand that such frameworks will not be convincing to a vacillating muddled middle, or will even provide rhetorical fodder to any firmly pro-life readers who encounter them. Responding to Bonow’s Salon story, user “Old Shaman” says “I don't believe this writer. I think she wrote this to make Planned Parenthood look bad.” And “treehouselibrary” agrees that “it's so over the top, I spent half the piece suspecting it was a pro-lifer's hoax.” These readers are identifying the same straw-woman invoked by Filipovic, Shantae, and Zerwick: the young, childless, playful woman who we think of too much, but really shouldn’t be thinking about (or thinking like) at all. Lee Edelman challenges queer theorists to imagine what might happen if they accepted the figural queerness of embodying the a-futurist “death drive” that the most homophobic pundits imagine they represent. Similarly, “Old Shaman” and “treehouselibrary” are probably correct that writers like Bonow or Brown are intentionally playing with the possibilities of inhabiting the careless, joyful, self-prioritizing or self-sufficient woman; however, these users reject this rhetorical strategy as both repugnant and too risky—it will cast a
shadow of queerness and political illegibility over all pro-choice men and women, making them “look bad.”

I found similar debates over legibility and visibility in the comments on Jezebel’s coverage of the Aliza Shvarts “abortion art” story from 2008. According to her current bio page at NYU’s Tisch school of the arts, “Aliza Shvarts is an artist, writer, and scholar whose work deals broadly with queer and feminist understandings of reproductive labor and temporality.” This self-description makes her an almost comically perfect embodiment of the ideas my thesis explores. Shvarts’s 2008 art happening, in which she repeatedly inseminated herself, took non-prescription abortifacients, and then planned to display the resulting blood (and possible products of conception) at her university’s art gallery as a senior thesis project, has become an object of study for scholars. 7 Shvarts’s own 2011 reflection on the project, published in Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, is well worth a read. In it, the performance artist reflects on the naturalization of female bodies as reproductive, engages questions of temporality, narrativity, and legibility, and situates herself within a genealogy of queer and feminist performance artists. She identifies two intertwined elements in her work:

The first is the series of specific actions undertaken by a body over time. The second

is the telling and retelling which made those actions knowable to the world. This

first

7 For additional reading on the project see Shvarts’s 2011 “Figuration and Failure, Pedagogy and Performance: Reflections Three Years Later,” or Jennifer Doyle’s article in Qui Parle, “‘Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory,’” which puts the project and the controversy-as-project in conversation with queer theory and with Edelman’s No Future, specifically, as well as Doyle’s later book, Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art, which includes a chapter on Shvarts.
element – my physical act – was designed to interrogate the capability of the female form through the intentionality of art practice, calling into question normative notions of production, reproduction, and artistic value through my own bodily experience. Yet because I performed this act in isolation, and because the Yale administration banned my planned installation of the various documentary materials collected during those acts, the latter narrative element became the piece’s dominant performative mode. (155)

Shvarts experienced the opposite of an unintended pregnancy; in fact, she intentionally became pregnant to facilitate a (possibly) terminated pregnancy as the stated goal or telos of the situation. If Bonow and Brown explored the extent to which an abortion could become an occasion for happiness or joy, Shvarts took the line of questioning further, investigating whether it can be intended or “wanted” for its own sake. More importantly, as Shvarts herself explains, above, storytelling and the “narrative element” became the main way in which she publically explored this question.

Insofar as Shvarts is yet another narrating agent to whom the discourse community responded, the most interesting and relevant aspect of her project to this thesis took place in the comments sections of (purportedly) feminist, pro-choice online publications. In her own analysis, Shvarts certainly suggests that such dialogue is part of the performance itself, which, far from ending in 2008, "continues to take place as long as language about it continues to be produced" (161). On one hand, “abortion art” can be
cast as the apex of the same educated white privilege that could support the radical narrative practice of pieces like “Joyful” and “Happy,” but on the other hand, it is worthwhile to consider how Shvarts was able to expand the conversation around, in her own words, “which talents or techniques of the body are culturally sanctioned, about what kinds of bodies and cultural experiences are presupposed or privileged, and about which are not” (160).

As an example of how these questions played out in the context of a particular pro-choice online discourse community, I will consider the dialogue which proliferated along with Jezebel’s combative ongoing coverage of the story from 2008. At that time, the youthful feminist publication, which is usually unafraid to get a bit queer and irreverent about topical gossip, wrote: “as much as some of us want the little performance artist who could bleed from her vagina, Aliza Shvarts, to just go away, we feel obliged to offer you an update” (Grose, "Yale Renders Aliza Shvarts' Art Installation Impotent,” emphasis added). Another article angrily wrote that, in a climate of rapidly encroaching conservative laws against reproductive rights, Shvarts was “not helping the discourse” (Grose, “In The Name Of Art”). Beneath this series of short update pieces, which continued in a similarly dismissive vein, a spirited and surprisingly self-reflective debate began about whether Shvarts could be, or should be, claimed by the pro-choice movement. I consider this conversation relevant because it very clearly illustrates the way the pro-choice community reacts and engages in self-reflection when encountering what seems to be the furthest limit of its patience for extreme interpretations of femaleness and reproducitivity.
Like the image-conscious users who wrote about the hoax-like infelicitous quality of Brown’s story, *Jezebel* reader “KittenFluff” writes “she is doing tremendous damage to the pro-choice cause by treating abortion/induced miscarriage so flippantly. I imagine she considers herself pro-choice, but the result does much to advance the anti-choice stance.” This reader suggests that even if Shvarts “considers herself” pro-choice, she cannot or should not claim that identity because her inclusion would hurt the cause. User “snowycakes” almost writes a think piece of her own on Shvarts. She identifies herself as “irrevocably pro-choice,” and muses that “Aliza Shvarts's little experiment, in my opinion, helps the right wing pro-life campaign less in the sense that it gives them an irresponsible abortion poster girl, than that it serves to outrage liberal minded pro-choicers AGAINST her.” She explains that the pro-choice public’s rejection of Shvarts makes them look *even worse* than someone who takes up the flippant mantle of the “irresponsible abortion poster girl” whom the pronatalist articles dismissed, and whom Bonow and Brown attempted to performatively reclaim. In making this point, “snowycakes” seems to encounter the fault lines within ambivalent pro-choice logic, but to suggest that any experience which exposes these fault lines, or the way that the pro-choice paradigm has failed to serve multiple marginalized populations, must be de-emphasized in public representations. Such a standpoint condones cautious rhetorical strategies in which the privilege of “choice” must be used responsibly and in the clear mainstream public interest so that it will not be revoked entirely. She adds:

Suddenly, we all sound resoundingly pro-life. Can't we just write her off as some sort of fucked-up freak show anomaly and not give her the time of day??

Otherwise, this sort of example, and our horrified reactions to it, are going to
come back in some supreme court case to slap us in the face. (“snowycakes” on “In The Name of Art”)

Like Filipovic and Zerwick, this pro-choice user seems to conclude that giving any additional visibility or attention to the “irresponsible abortion poster girl” will be disastrous for the larger cause; in order to keep abortion moving toward the center of futurist family life (and thus, toward continued legal protection), Shvarts should be “written off” (strongly echoing Jezebel’s wish that she would “just go away”) and considered an “anomaly” and “freak”—the opposite of the responsible “most” and “many” that more conservative pro-choice journalists, as well as numerous commenters, seek to emphasize.

User “CarrieMC” agrees that the public image of the abortion-seeking woman is urgently at stake, but sees a potential reminiscent of No Future in embracing subject positions that are queer or impossible to hegemonic value systems: “I get that we're all scared of being called murderers and irresponsible whores,” she writes, “but I thought that was the point of it. Yeah, I'm a murderer and a silly whore, but I am in control of my uterus and your outrage doesn't change that.” She adds that she is “just weirded out that there is a big rush to ally with the right to condemn this woman and dismiss her.” Like Bonow and Brown, “CarrieMC” seems to consider the “critical efficacy” (Edelman 18) of inhabiting that ground which appears impossible because of its anti-futurist, non-teleological implications. To fear being queered as “silly” and “irresponsible,” in addition to murderous, is to miss an opportunity to expand vocabularies beyond those inherited from the Right and from hetero-patriarchy more broadly.
Not all pro-choice readers took a disciplinary stance; some forwarded the message of “queer” non-pronatalist joyfulness that Bonow and Brown attempted to make speakable. Responding to one of Jezebel’s dismissive updates on Aliza Shvarts, “nolooking” admonished her fellow pro-choice readers for saying “that she's sick, she's disgusting, and she'll be sorry when she's thirty-five and unable to fulfill the baby-shaped hole in the heart of every woman,” and added that perhaps the “use” or telos of Shvarts’s reproductive system could be “make a point about the link made between reproductive ability and feminine identity,” rather than “to make babies.” In this section, I have tried to briefly sketch some of the repeated rhetorical moves that emerged in the comments sections on unusually bold recent stories of abortions or abortion art performances. In each case, there was also a significant contingent of pro-life trolls who appeared, perhaps rerouted from conservative platforms which had posted think pieces of their own about the way that stories like Bonow or Brown’s are evidence of a liberal feminist ‘satanic death cult.’ While their various shamings, scoldings, and biblical excerpts would constitute a large and fascinating object of study, I have not analyzed them here. For the most part, such responses are both expected and ignored. The comments that have interested me, especially in their extreme predictability of structure, were those that strongly identified themselves as speaking for and to the pro-choice majority, and then moved to shift figural queerness to certain types of women—or certain types of thoughts and feelings. In a way, these pro-choice “concern trolls” also came to shame and scold, enforcing their own viewpoints, which are liberal while remaining cautiously obedient to the logic of reproductive futurism.

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8 Concern trolling entails entering a comments section or discussion forum in order to express sympathetic concern, while either intentionally or inadvertently derailing conversations or invalidating the accepted premises of a discussion; an insidious form of lane hopping.
CONCLUSION

The previous two chapters each briefly explore a facet of the debate between those pro-choicers who wish to use (and thus reify) hegemonic values, and those who defy legibility in order to fight the foreclosure of different ways of being, choosing, and feeling. It should be noted that, in attempting an introductory sketch of the pro-choice online community circa 2015, I have polarized my chosen examples for simplicity. These findings exemplify trends that I identified across hundreds of narratives and user comments, which also included other differently nuanced positions. I consider this analysis to have merely gestured toward the full possibility of a rhetorical study of this—or any other similarly specific yet factional—discourse community that makes its home and defines its boundaries in interactive online environments.

It may also seem strange that the readings included here are structurally lopsided; while chapter three considers the mini-debates that continued in the comments sections, chapter two only presents narratives of maternally-framed choice, without including any element of interaction between the stories and their intended audiences. This structural imbalance appears because the two stories in chapter two did not allow comments sections. The foreclosure built into the platform of publication matters a great deal, because it further insinuates that motherhood is an image which no one can attack; it is not open to queering or to suspicion of joyful death drives or to expulsion from a community of eager pro-choice critics. The stories in chapter two were more constructed; journalists curated the examples, edited the content, and manipulated reader experience through formatting and compelling familial imagery. As I noted, self-justificatory rhetors like Shantae from Cosmo often use the second person to establish
their status as belonging within the audience which they address. In closing the comments and foreclosing the messiness of the internet’s inevitable array of supportive, combative, and outright strange dialogues—a space for what Condit calls the “negotiated transformation” of discourses (15)—these authors created an unassailable surface both rhetorically and through their chosen medium.

In a way, the polemic and singular stories told by Bonow and Brown are more communal and more genuinely in dialogue with the discourse community which mostly repudiates them. Both authors explicitly state their wish not to generalize from their experiences in a way that would preclude other women’s other ways of being. They also leave their stories radically open to sometimes scathing discussion and negotiation. Aliza Shvarts likewise made public reaction and debate an integral part of the abortion experiences she curated in her controversial art project. In a comment addressed directly to author Kristen Brown, Fusion reader April Padilla joins the ongoing debate between different pro-choice positions that posit one sort of unsatisfactory “standard narrative” and seek to replace it with another. She writes, “I really appreciate women like you being willing to speak out and try to change the narrative we've been fed for so many years. A look at the comment thread proves that it is still an act of bravery.” It is also an act of rhetorical change-making. The stories in chapter three were brave because they explored the liveability and speakability of the “irresponsible abortion poster girl,” and especially because they left themselves open to derision, debate, and even outright rejection from their intended audience and community of support.

The bravery, rhetorical importance, and potential queerness of these public storytelling performances are especially noticeable when they are contrasted to what
Edelman calls “refusals” of the queer. Such refusals are identifiable in the more future-friendly and choice ambivalent examples from chapter two, and in the comments in chapter three that attempted to delineate boundaries of acceptable pro-choice-ness. Edelman writes that refusals impose “politics as the only game in town, exacting as the price of admission the subject’s (hetero)normalization” (26), while Condit warns that pro-choice strategies that lean on normalizing superordinate values (like the emphatic non-negation of the future implied in Shantae’s “total of 6 kiddos” and Hannah’s thumbs-up-filled family portrait) “have been constructing the conditions of their own eventual defeat” (165). Such concessions invite further regulation and intervention along ever narrowing ideas of what is “good” or acceptable in an abortion experience and its “reasons.”

The heteronormative essentializing of some women as the responsible, inevitable reproducers of social meaning is only one small piece of a larger negotiation of the way that the language and ideology espoused by any movement can marginalize potential allies and fail to serve the users most in need of advocacy. In her essay calling for recognition of the shared nonnormativity and marginality among many subject positions, Cathy Cohen asks “how we might construct a new political identity that is truly liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality” (441). While the demographics of #ShoutYourAbortion and the other nonnormative examples I examined in this thesis all carried their own forms of race- and class-based privilege, I also consider the conversations started by their critical disruptions to be part of what Cohen articulates as the “search for a new political direction and
agenda,” which will “not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks
to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist”
(437). Taken as one among numerous critiques of both the compromising pro-choice
paradigm and feminist efforts more broadly, the types of rhetorical change-makers I have
highlighted here should be considered just one small part of a movement toward
inclusiveness, intersectionality, and truer representation. This thesis has attempted to
contribute to such a project by critically examining the way that cautious rhetoric and
under-examined assumptions of heteronormativity can fundamentally limit the available
vocabularies with which women can understand themselves and their reproductive health
decisions.

While it might sound hyperbolic to imagine a world in which each woman
seeking an abortion would be, for example, rated on a scale of maternal feeling, or have
her abortion scored according to how much it would impact any future children’s chances
to thrive and become “desirable” citizens, unofficial ways of thinking and speaking can
truly impact behavior, and even legislature. As Press and Cole suggest, even narrowly
situated in-group negotiations of meaning and legibility, such as the snapshot of
discourse I have examined here, force the community to ask itself “what needs are
recognized, and which individuals ‘deserve’ to have their needs met?” (69).

#ShoutYourAbortion and related impulses toward narrative disruption can be situated in
an ongoing genealogy of critiques originating at the margins of pro-choice advocacy,
feminism, and politics to demand the status of ‘deserving’ subjects without
compromising on the unfiltered recognition and representation of their needs.
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