

WE ARE NOT VESSELS: IRISH WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF ABORTION

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by

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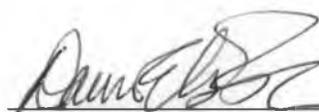
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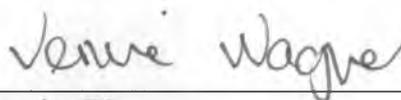
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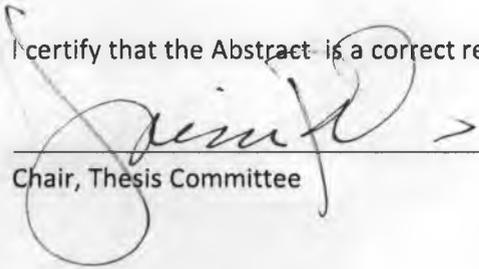
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WE ARE NOT VESSELS: IRISH WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF ABORTION

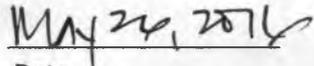
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This journalistic thesis consists of four articles exploring Irish women's experiences of having an abortion in the U.K., as abortion is still illegal in Ireland. Using qualitative interviews, academic inquiry, and cultural analysis, I examine how public discourse, academic theory and popular culture all create an oppressively prescriptive narrative regarding abortion that women must navigate—even as they navigate actual experiences of abortion itself. The articles address women's experience of socially prescribed feelings of guilt; personal and cultural roles of motherhood and patriarchal figures; and the spatial geography of abortion on a personal and national scale. The final article addresses ambiguity and ambivalence and the role they play in the women's experiences and in my experience of writing this thesis and becoming another person who interprets these women's testimony. I strive instead to do what Ireland has failed to do for them: that is, to listen.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

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Introduction

“Empathy isn’t just remembering to say ‘that must be really hard’ – it’s figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all. Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires you know nothing.

Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see.”

*~Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*.*

The Context

In 2014, the UN’s human rights committee chair and former UN special rapporteur on torture Nigel Rodley accused Ireland’s draconian anti-abortion laws of treating women “as a vessel and nothing more.” His statement inspired a rallying cry among Ireland’s pro-choice women and activists, who took to social media declaring #WeAreNotVessels.

#RepealThe8th has also been a call of the movement, marking demands for a referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, which equates the right to life of a pregnant woman with that of an embryo or foetus and criminalises abortion in all cases except where to continue a pregnancy would result in death. Even in these cases, abortions are not always granted, as evident by the death of Savita Halappanavar in University Hospital Galway in 2012. At 17

weeks pregnant, Halappanavar sought an abortion because her foetus was infected and she was miscarrying; Halappanavar was infected as well. The hospital refused to give her an abortion, even in her condition, as it was not a certainty that her condition was fatal. On October 28 2012, Halappanavar died of septicaemia after the dead foetus was finally removed and the mother given antibiotics—too late to have any curative effect.

This tragic incident led to Ireland's passing the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act in 2013, supposedly remedying the problems confronted in the Halappanavar case. But the "liberalization" consisted only of allowing abortion when the mother's life was endangered by the pregnancy itself or by resulting suicidal impulses—impulses caused by something like rape or incest. Rape or incest alone was not sufficient: a woman is, by law, forced to bear her rapist's or molester's baby, even if she does not want it, so long as she is not suicidal. If she claims suicidal ideation, her case is brought before a panel of psychiatrists, doctors and obstetricians who weigh her claims and deem whether or not she should be granted an abortion.

Ireland's legislators and jurists pretty much always find reasons not to.

On 2014, a 17-year-old foreign national woman known only as Ms Y arrived in Ireland seeking asylum after being raped in her home country. She was 8 weeks pregnant—a result of the rape. Presenting at an Irish hospital, desperate and suicidal, Ms Y applied to have an abortion and was told she would have to be assessed by

a panel. In the 13 weeks the panel took to make a decision, she attempted to enter the UK to procure an abortion but was denied entry because of visa issues. In Ireland, psychiatrists on the decision panel concurred that an abortion was warranted, but the obstetrician, while agreeing with the danger of suicide, did not agree. The abortion was called off. At 21 weeks, Ms Y again threatened suicide and went on hunger strike, intending to kill herself through starvation or dehydration. Eventually she was strapped to her hospital bed and force fed through a nasogastric tube in order to keep her and the foetus alive. At 25 weeks, a Caesarean section was performed, and her baby was taken into state care.

In March 2016 Ms Y brought a High Court civil action against the Irish State. Her action includes a claim for alleged trespass; reckless and intentional infliction of emotional harm and suffering. It also includes a claim for alleged breach of duty; alleged false imprisonment and alleged unlawful deprivation of liberty.

Nigel Rodley and pro-choice activists may declare that Irish women are not vessels – but the State has yet to agree.

The Project

As an Irish journalist and feminist, I have been acutely aware of the debates and activism surrounding abortion in Ireland over the past several years and deeply frustrated by the stories being shared with the Irish public via the mainstream media. News reporting focuses on legal and medical facts, eschewing first-hand

accounts of women who had or were seeking an abortion. Those television and radio shows that do allow women to speak are forced by reductive media guidelines to “balance” any testimony from a woman who had an abortion with arguments from anti-choice activists and organisations. This “balance” usually comes in the form of an anti-choice man citing religious and moral arguments about the personhood of embryos and the sanctity of life; arguments that, as academic Kristin Luker notes, are often deployed in order to conceal the traditional beliefs regarding gender roles and motherhood that underlie abortion debates.

My original aim in writing a journalistic thesis was to interview Irish women who had travelled to the UK to have abortions and then use my platform as a journalist to bring their stories to their fore, through journalistic articles. I aimed to use my skills as a researcher and academic to help explore and analyse the complexity of their experience and to allow the voices of the women to drive my writing.

After interviewing nine Irish women who had travelled to the UK to have abortions and reviewing my data, I decided to write four articles, each addressing a recurring theme in the interviews: the representation of abortion in popular culture; the role of space and exile; the women’s lack of guilt regarding their abortion; and the theme of motherhood.

There were always going to be limitations to my research. My sample size was small, and due to my recruiting participants through social media, the women who responded were of a shared demographic: well-educated, socially engaged, feminist and mainly

(though not all) middle-class. Abortion itself is a class issue in Ireland. The financial demands of travelling to the UK to have abortions make it so, as do the differing social attitudes towards sex education, pregnancy and abortion between middle-class and working-class women. Middle-class women more likely to receive abortions in the UK, but they are far from the only demographic of women who do, and I acknowledge that the experiences of working class women are, for the most part, absent from my thesis. I present my participants' experiences not as representative of all Irish women's experiences of abortion, but as examples of a particular experience while respecting the particular intricacies of each woman's story.

The Dilemma

As I began analysing my data more carefully, I recognized a complicated theme emerging in my interviews that I had to address: my position as both a journalist and researcher and the ways my participants' awareness of my dual role affected their interviews with me.

The women knew that I was a journalist and that after completing my MA thesis I intended to submit these articles for publication in Irish and international publications. In apparent response to my positions, they repeatedly expressed an awareness that their experiences (though not their identities, which would be kept confidential) would be made public. They were especially attuned to the possibility of scrutiny

from pro- and anti-choice campaigners and from other women who may be considering an abortion.

Again and again, the women stated their wish to reassure other women and described disdain for and anger towards anti-choice rhetoric that presents women who have had abortion as experiencing lifelong regret, guilt and emotional torment. Meanwhile, I became increasingly aware of their desire to be spokeswomen for abortion and the many ways that desire may have shaped their interviews. The demands of being spokeswomen seemed to prevent them from expressing any ambiguity or emotional distress about their experience lest it be used by anti-choice campaigners against them - or against other women. In response to a society and legislation that demands they remain silent or act as the “perfect victim” by conforming to one-dimensional narratives of violent conceptions, abortion-as-trauma and abortion-as-guilt narratives, the women seemed to feel compelled to perform the opposite narrative – that of the “perfect outlier.” I began to wonder how my writing might signal another form of resistance—one that acknowledges the complexity of women’s experiences, rather than creating another one-dimensional narrative?

As a researcher, it felt vital to acknowledge and explore my participants’ declared lack of ambivalence and the performed nature of their certainty, which emerged in their frequent use of absolute terms, defensive language, and repeated mantras. I watched as the women performed certainty by expressing empathy for and allowing for ambivalence in other women but not themselves. I saw ambivalence in their

claims to have forgotten the details of moments of doubt or heightened emotion in their experiences of abortion, but to analyse these absences and the unspoken would mean to interpret the women's testimony, rather than report it, and this felt uncomfortable and potentially damaging to my participants. All women have experienced having their words questioned, interpreted and their meaning (often incorrectly) assumed and asserted by those with more privilege and authority. For Irish women who are seeking or have had an abortion, this interpretation is political and controlling: their feelings and experiences are questioned by the panels who grant or deny Irish women's right to an abortion, as well as anti-choice campaigners and others who create and affirm a one-dimensional narrative of abortion.

Ultimately, it felt vital that I allow room for interpretation and analysis while not aligning myself with other people and authoritative bodies who only interpret these women's testimonies as a method of control. I had to create a framework of empathetic analysis, where interpretation and the exploration of the ambiguous, unsaid and unacknowledged are used not as tools of control and restriction, but as gateways to understanding and possibility.

The Inspiration

My approach was influenced by writers and researchers whose writing is defined by their self-awareness and who are transparent about the process of constructing a narrative.

Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*, not only explores how empathy affects people and their expression and perception of emotion, but also practices self-reflection about her role as a writer and her editing process. Ruth Behar also demonstrates this commitment to acknowledging feeling as an influence in the act of witnessing and writing in her ethnographic memoir *The Vulnerable Observer*. *Forty-One False Starts* author, Janet Malcolm, is another journalist who literally shows her editing process, presenting different versions of introductions and paragraphs, showing the various ways a narrative can be created depending on the information and focus the writer chooses. Researchers Patti Lather and Chris Smithies also influenced my approach and presentation, as their work in *Troubling The Angels* reveals not only their research data but also their personal reflections on the process of researching and writing about a community of stigmatised women. Sara Ahmed's writing in *The Promise of Happiness* and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* heightened my understanding of the role emotion plays in forming social, cultural and political attitudes, and how invoking emotion can be used as a form of control or empowerment. Memoirist and creative fiction writer Lidia Yuknavitch not only addresses the role memory and emotion play in our retelling of experiences but also uses different formatting and presentation techniques in her experimental fiction work to convey how narratives can be fragmented while co-existing alongside other truths. Eve Sedgwick similarly uses formatting to marry art with memory in *A Dialogue on Love*, interrupting her prose and presenting certain passages in haiku form and demonstrating how the writer can use literary devices to create meaning and metaphor. Finally, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's writing about

identity and her TED Talk ‘The Danger Of A Single Story’ highlights the dangers of one-dimensional narratives, the reasons people may conform to the stereotypes created about them, and how resisting these stories can acknowledge the complexity of human experience and promote a greater depth of understanding.

All of these writers inspired my approach to my thesis, which attempts to explore the complex feelings and realities of women who have abortion, and acknowledge how their experiences cannot be reduced to one simple narrative. I was also inspired by the self-awareness and self-reflexivity of these writers to acknowledge my role as a writer and researcher in my construction of a narrative, and to use formatting and presentation as well as tone to be transparent about this process of editing and construction.

The Philosophy

This framework of empathetic analysis depended on my willingness to respect the women’s testimony while also trying to understand and express the feelings behind their testimony – or their silence.

While analysing the interviews, I looked for occasions where the women seemed to be limiting the feelings and thoughts they allowed themselves to express and experience, and I acknowledge the reasons why they may be doing so. I also looked for similar and recurring statements in the interviews and sought to understand what these shared utterances were expressing and responding to.

Empathy relies on the presence of at least two parties, as the expression of experience is perceived and felt by another. In order to embrace this as a research philosophy, I had to remain aware of and transparent about my role and process as a writer and researcher constructing a narrative. I address this explicitly in my article on ambiguity, where I show myself grappling with the data, my interpretations, academic research and my experience of editing and selecting what to present in my articles. By presenting my feelings of ambivalence about choosing between reporting what my participants say and interpreting their statements, I acknowledge and explore my role in constructing a narrative – including the possibility that in so doing, I could be repeating and perpetuating the issues created by others who create a narrative about women who have abortions. The potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding remain, and as with all research, I cannot control how others read and use the material. That anti-choice individuals could use my explorations of the complex experiences of abortion – including ambiguity, stress and emotional isolation – to further their own causes remains a real possibility. However, while it is important to bear these issues in mind and do what I can to protect the specific women involved by changing their names and identifying details, I feel it is equally important not to let the politicized nature of abortion discourse prevent writers and researchers from attempting to explore the complex realities of abortion

This framework of empathetic analysis was not limited to the process; it shapes also the presentation of my articles. To avoid paraphrasing my participants and be

transparent about the interpretative process, I wanted to use direct quotes from the interviews that were clearly separate from my analysis and reporting. I also wanted to mark my interpretative statements that seek to evoke and embody what the women experience. This is most evident in my article on ambiguity, where I clearly mark and differentiate the women's quotes, academic research and my thoughts. It is the only article in which the quotes are interrupted by my interpretation and analysis, allowing the reader to observe the construction of a narrative as it occurs.

This philosophy of separation and transparency is more subtly conveyed in my other articles, as quotes remain uninterrupted and separated from the reporting, and my attempts to contextualise the women's experiences by evoking their emotional state are marked. By aligning first- and second-person statements on the page with the women's quotes, I am evoking and presenting on the page a form of an embodied empathy in order to express the shared experiences and emotions of the women. These shifts in tone and style are differentiated on the page through the use of typeface and spacing, allowing the reader to notice the different facets of the article and how I constructed the narrative of the article – while the physical space between the women's quotes and my writing also act as an invitation to the reader to recognise and insert their own interpretations.

The women I interviewed allowed me, through my writing, to co-construct a narrative about their experience. It is only one of many possible constructions that I hope occur. This project and the articles within are not intended to be definitive statements, but

the opening of a cultural and national conversation that allows women's stories to be heard in their constantly unravelling complexity.

“What is a girl but this? This obscene and beautiful making against the expanse of white. This brilliant imagination, inventing meaning.”

*~Lidia Yukanvitch, *The Small Backs Of Children.**

Article 1

Guilty Not Guilty: The Pain Inflicted by Theories of Judgement and Blame

“This is about her attitude.”

In 2014, a 19-year-old Northern Irish woman confided to her two flatmates that she was pregnant and could not afford to travel to England for an abortion. Instead, she had purchased abortifacient pills online and induced a miscarriage.

Eight days after the teenager miscarried, her flatmates reported her to the police for illegally purchasing abortion pills. In Spring 2016, the woman was sentenced to three months in prison, with two years suspended. Explaining their decision to report her to police four weeks after she had told them she intended to abort her pregnancy, the woman’s flatmates, now aged 36 and 22, said that the situation and their decision “isn’t a debate about the rights and wrongs of abortion.” They cited the then-teenager’s attitude as the reason for their decision.

“This isn’t anything to do with the rights and wrongs of abortion. I’m not anti-abortion,” said the 36-year-old.

“This is about her attitude. It was as if she was getting rid of a piece of clothing,” she added. “There was absolutely no remorse. Even the way she was up and away out

and doing her own thing a day after the abortion, while me and our other housemate just walked around in shock.”

The second housemate confirmed that the two women had decided to report the teenager eight days after her induced miscarriage.

"We tried so hard to support her when she told us about the pregnancy but it made me so angry when she kept calling it 'the pest'," said the 22-year-old. "Then, after the abortion, she showed no remorse. It was so weird the way she reacted to what had happened," said the woman.

She added, "I tried to be nice to her. But really there was no sign of remorse at all, her attitude really got to me."

According to their own testimony, these two women didn't have their friend and flatmate arrested out a sense of civic duty or a moral imperative to follow Northern Irish laws prohibiting the purchase of abortive substances. They reported this woman because she failed to display the regret, guilt and paralyzing emotional turmoil they believe is natural and required of women who undergo an abortion.

She wasn't punishing herself, so they decided to.

She didn't hurt, so they made sure she did.

“I was asking [the woman in the Marie Stopes clinic] like, ‘I’m really happy with this decision, like I think this is the right decision for me, em, you know, it’s come very naturally to me and everything, but I’m a little worried about years down the line, because anything I’ve read – magazine articles and news articles and everything – they’re all from women talking about being absolutely devastated and how it affected the rest of their lives and how they never got over it’, and I was kind of saying ‘you know, is that going to happen to me, like am I going to be in emotional turmoil and years from now am I going to regret it?’ and ‘I don’t know’ was basically the answer. And I said ‘Well, you’ve obviously dealt with lots of women, like what’s the general feeling?’” ~ Joanna, 42.

In my research about Irish women’s experience of abortion, none of the women I interviewed felt any guilt over their decision – however, they feared that one day they would. This fear was not based on their informed, considered decision nor their experience, which they all described as positive and “relieving.” Their fear was based on anti-choice arguments that insist women who have abortions are often left overwhelmed by guilt and suffering from devastating emotional effects of post-abortion syndrome.

The term “post-abortion syndrome” was coined in 1981 by Vincent Rue, a U.S. anti-abortion advocate who stated that women who have abortions experience a form of post-traumatic stress disorder characterised by feelings of guilt, anxiety and depression. Post-abortion syndrome has never been scientifically established, and the

American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association do not recognize it. Rue's 2009 research showing a correlation between abortion and mental health [[hyperlink to Priscilla, Coleman & Rue](#)] has been widely disparaged by scientific and academic communities, who criticised the methods and the irreproducible findings. Nevertheless, anti-choice campaigns have found in Rue's work a useful tool.

Meanwhile, a 2015 peer-reviewed study [[link to Decision Rightness and Emotional Responses to Abortion in the United States: A Longitudinal Study](#)²] exploring emotional responses to abortion showed that out of 667 U.S. women questioned by researchers over three years, only five per cent felt negative emotions of anger, regret, guilt and sadness. The "overwhelming majority" felt happiness and relief in their decision – regardless of whether they had the abortion early on or later into their pregnancy. This study did not meet the widespread criticism and refutation that Rue's work elicited. Instead, social scientists found the research more convincing. Nevertheless, the myth that women will inevitably feel guilt regarding their abortion persists.

Though they were sure in their decision to have an abortion, seven of my nine interviewees feared they may later feel a tormenting sense of guilt for the rest of their lives cleverly irrefutable as they posit that women who do not feel guilt are merely repressing their feelings; a way of both transforming a woman content with

her decision into a victim deluded and harmed by her own choices, and holding the threat of guilt above women's head for their entire lives.

You don't feel guilty – yet. But just wait. You will.

“And...yeah...I...I just cried so much, for not feeling guilty, and I felt like I was a psychopath, I felt like I had no humanity, because I should have humanity because this was a living thing, but I didn't so...” ~ Aoife, 28.

The insidious and omnipresent nature of the abortion-as-guilt narrative means that women who were comfortable in their decision to have an abortion are led to suffer emotional distress and isolation as they are bombarded with social and political messages regarding how all women who have abortions feel differently than they do. The anti-abortion side gains another victim as yet another woman who receives an abortion succumbs to negative emotion.

Guilt regarding abortion thus becomes a marker for a woman's essential humanity – but the emotion can be transferred and projected. As women who have had abortions feel guilty for not feeling guilty, the pervasive abortion-as-guilt formula is followed – but in a way that allows women to still embody their personal and political ideologies.

Most of my participants did not feel guilty for aborting their pregnancy. They did feel guilty about their failing to experience this supposedly mandatory emotion. The

women become emotional outliers - aware of the cultural requirements and resistant, even defiant. However, by presenting themselves as beings who still grapple with their social conscience and are capable of feeling guilt after an abortion, they are reassured that they are still emotional, ethical beings. Navigating the guilty-not-guilty divide, women respond to the cultural assertion that that having an abortion is an act only an unfeeling, inhumane being could pursue. Women resist these expectations, and, ironically, through their resistance, help keep those expectations in place and powerful.

“I had a friend, a work colleague, who had had one and, ehh... she had developed some sort of tick in her neck where she had to, like a crick in her neck that was really sore and she ended up going to a physical therapist. And she was quite into alternative kind of medicines and therapies and stuff like that so she ended up going to sort of, a... I dunno if it was Reiki or something, and she ended up telling them that she had had an abortion or that maybe it was the tension and the guilt from that, and whoever it was that dealt with her said that maybe she needed to share that guilt and she ended up telling her elderly parents about the abortion. And I remember kind of looking at her and saying, ‘You’re doing what??’” ~ Joanna, 42.

Meanwhile, anti-choice women can assert their own ideologies through their perceptions of guilt, monitoring how women who have abortions emotionally respond to their experiences and either projecting guilt on to the women – or performing it themselves.

In the above quote, a woman who had an abortion experienced a common physical ailment, and sought out treatment for it. Instead of receiving a diagnosis that accounted for physical causes, or even the stress of having undergone a procedure shrouded by so much stigma and silenced, she was diagnosed with post-abortion guilt. That Joanna focused on this story of her friend shows her own fear that abortion will become the defining experience of her life, and all negative experiences or emotions will thus be ascribed to it. She sees her friend urged to treat that guilt the way good Irish women are supposed to: through confession. Guilt was perceived, projected and remedied – all by a supposed caregiver, an outside observer.

Just like those other observers - the flatmates who reported the Northern Irish woman. They not only criticised and indeed ultimately punished the young woman for not feeling guilty about aborting her pregnancy, they also performed paralyzing guilt themselves. Their response was reactive, noting the absence of a socially required emotion and filling that perceived void.

“Even the way she was up and away out and doing her own thing a day after the abortion, while me and our other house-mate just walked around in shock,” said the 36 year old, putting their “correct” emotional response in direct contrast to their flatmate, who failed to demonstrate the immobilizing emotion expected of her. The 22 year old added she has been haunted thinking of the aborted foetus, claiming “I can't

stop thinking that it might have been alive when it was born. It is awful.” Invoking the image of a live baby left to die, rather than a terminated pregnancy, the 22 year old utilises anti-choice rhetoric of embryo as personhood and abortion as murder. She performs the moral tumult and nightmarish, haunting guilt expected of women who commit such acts. By portraying themselves as emotionally devastated, morally appalled and guilt-wracked by the abortion, the flatmates use the social scripts of abortion-as-guilt to distance themselves from their outlier flatmate, marking themselves as good women and citizens who obey the rules and laws of their community. By aborting her pregnancy, their flatmate stepped out of line. They would take her place on the right side of that line.

The abortion-as-guilt narrative was going to be fulfilled, even if supporting characters had to recite the required lines.

“It’s the Cora Sherlocks and the people on Twitter going ‘It’s women that are hurt by abortion’ and I wish I could go ‘I wasn’t hurt by it.’ I wish, sometimes, when people when tell me how I should feel, in a hypothetical way when they go ‘Lots of women who have abortions get breast cancer in the future’ or that ‘Once they have a child, the guilt of killing their first child’ ... when I see shit like that I just want to tell them that the only things that make me feel upset and make me cry is the way I feel society would look at me, not the actually having it myself, it’s the fear of you shitheads. I hate you so much. I hate them so much. I really do.” ~ Aoife, 28.

The research establishing women's guilt over abortions has been conducted by anti-choice advocates and refuted by the scientific community.

Nevertheless, the narrative of guilt dominates social discourse. And, while advocates who employ guilt as a deterrent to abortion claim they are concerned for the mental well-being of women, they neither advocate for more post-abortion support or health services, nor challenge the stigma that may invoke feelings of guilt or depression in women who have abortions. As thousands of Irish women continue to travel for abortions annually, anti-choice advocates arguing that abortion results in feelings of guilt do not seek to understand or improve the reality of women's experiences. They instead seek to control the narrative. They seek to frighten women out of having abortions under the threat of a life filled with turmoil.

Central to this abortion-as-guilt narrative is the notion that not only are women incapable of making decisions, but they also must be protected from specific, assumed emotions – real or merely possible. Reva Siegel of Yale Law School addresses how the abortion-as-guilt narrative has been framed as a “woman-protective antiabortion argument” might be might be reasonable personal advice, legislating to account for specific negative emotions is an act of policing. It is also an act reserved for abortion.

Many adults' decisions that might invoke feelings of guilt – cheating on a spouse, for example – do not attract the same level of attention or legislative campaigning. Siegel notes this specificity, labelling abortion-as-guilt discourse and legislation as “gender-

paternalist justifications for abortion restrictions” and highlighting how the guise of compassionate control acts as a seductively modern justification for using law to impose motherhood on women.

And as abortion-as-guilt advocates claim they want to prevent women from experiencing guilt, they implicitly enforce other negative emotions such as self-doubt, uncertainty, shame and fear.

They aren’t trying to care for women. They are trying to control them.

“But just think of the numbers of women who have, had abortions, if that were always true, I mean there would be hundreds of thousands of women walking around who are emotional wrecks, you know? So there has to be a large percentage of people who [are fine with their decision.]” ~ Joanne, 42.

In the Republic of Ireland, the need for women to experience and express guilt regarding their emotions becomes a tightly-regulated issues of representation, as broadcasters are prevented from showing stories of women feeling empowered or even neutral regarding their abortion.

Filmmakers Hilary Dully and Fintan Connolly’s documentary *50,000 Secret Journeys* comprised interviews with three Irish women about their experiences of abortion. Commissioned by Ireland's national television and radio broadcaster, Radio Telefis

Eireann, the programme intercut the interviews with news archive footage giving historical context to the abortion debate. However, the planned broadcast did not go ahead, as RTE executives suggested it was socially irresponsible.

“We were told that it lacked balance,” said Dully, “and that one of the reasons for this was that the women involved didn’t express sufficient remorse.”

Recent public debates in Ireland have also been dominated by this need for “balanced” portrayals of individuals’ personal experiences; a political and journalistic standard that is employed and espoused selectively. The need for women’s positive experiences of abortions to be “balanced” by tales of guilt and regret echoes the Irish media’s approach to the same-sex marriage referendum, as content and empowered gay and lesbian individuals were forced to endure the bigotry of homophobic legislators on television and radio broadcasts. [link to Irish Times analysis of “balance” in same-sex marriage debate.³] Anti-choice advocates demand these constructed and deliberately polarized public conversations because they benefit from them. The positive experiences of the majority of Irish women who have abortions are suddenly presented as a coin-toss between a happy life and one wracked by post-abortion guilt and inconsolable grief.

By censoring the testimony of women who are happy that they had an abortion, Ireland’s public discourse continues to perpetuate the ubiquity of a repeatedly

disproven narrative. It also prevents women from acknowledging the nuanced realities of their experiences. As women experience abortion for the first or only time, they have no precedent with which to emotionally process it, and so become dependent on the abortion-as-guilt theory as a narrative to either adhere to or rebel against. Only by removing the assumption and prescription of one particular emotion and experience can women begin to create narratives that are freely felt and recounted.

“You don’t know how you should react or feel while having it done or going for it, you know? Somehow you feel like you should be wearing a black veil and a black top.

Like, the death of something. But it was never something that existed in my head anyway, I never imagined it. I couldn’t imagine. Can’t now. Like my Mum would go

‘Oh it’d be this age now’ but I can’t...But I suppose, going back to your earlier question of what I imagined it – I imagined I’d be crying all the time, getting it done. I imagined myself having emotions or something – not that I didn’t have emotions, just that I think, I think it’s because of the way you see it. Yeah.” ~ Aoife, 28.

How women feel about abortions cannot be discovered telling them what and how they will feel, but by letting them tell us. Not to judge or to prosecute or to prescribe, but to understand.

Article 2

Motherhood and the Politics of Abortion

Wherever talk of abortion occurs, the idea of motherhood follows—not always explicit, but ever-present.

"I'd never thought hugely about kids and wasn't very maternal." ~ Joanna, 42.

"I don't ever remember my mother telling me about contraception you know, or asking me you know, if I was having sex – kind of normal conversations you imagine you would have, you know, with a teenage daughter." ~ Rachel, 38.

"I've had friends who had kids and are just in a council house, they're just existing, they're just existing. And it's terrible. And they're not even good mothers! Not being funny or horrible about it but they're not." ~ Aoife, 28.

As anti-choice rhetoric consistently addresses pregnancy as the possibility and potential for a child, the unspoken accompaniment is the possibility and potential for a mother. Women who choose to have abortions choose to leave the spaces and roles created by this pregnancy - that of child and mother – unoccupied. The political meanings attached to these spaces render their emptiness all the more potent, another gap dividing the pro- and anti-choice movement.

In Ireland, where abortion is illegal, pregnancy is legally and culturally assumed to be followed by the creation of a mother and child. In such a country, these empty spaces demand a social and cultural response. These spaces can be filled with reasons

why the women want to abort their pregnancy, but these women and the people in their lives can also step into these spaces themselves, volunteering to emotionally take on the roles of child or mother, performing the parts written by the pregnancy; understudies who recite the same lines but transform the dynamic of the performance.

And who better to play opposite these women in this two-hander than their very own mothers?

“I was the one looking after the kids the whole time, like she got depressed and I would mind them. Like my sister was two weeks old and I was making her formula milk, and minding her and you know, I just didn’t want to do that, I didn’t want to do that. And I didn’t want to do that to Mum either. I didn’t want to... So. So I brought her to the pub and I told her, and I told her in the same sentence ‘I’m pregnant’ - and she, like, gasped - ‘but I’m not keeping it.’ And she texted me that night, like we had the chat and she was being, ehh, mature – mature? She was being grand about it, but she was a bit emotional about it too and I was in bed that night and she texted me going ‘Aoife you should keep the baby, what if it’s a boy?’ And it’s because we don’t have any boys in our family, and it was like ‘This could be...’ and all this, and ‘I’ll mind the baby’ and everything like that.” ~ Aoife, 28.

The women who told their mothers they were pregnant and having an abortion found their relationships were adversely affected, even if only in the short-term. The women who kept their experience a secret felt a deeper disconnect. Those with already

difficult relationships with their mothers found their mothers' disappointment, dislike or distance reinforced by this new silence between them. Meanwhile, those with close relationships experienced a new and unwelcome emotional remoteness from their mothers. They began re-examining how supportive and unconditionally loving the relationship really was. And nearly all of the women who had abortions felt the need to assume a maternal role, protecting their own mother from their experience of abortion.

While the political relationship between abortion and motherhood is too often simplified, the personal relationship between them is unendingly complex and unfurling.

But becoming pregnant also represented a double-bind of need. Having a baby proffers the possibility of becoming their mothers, with the dependence the women feel that implies, but wanting an abortion also involves needing help – medically, financially and emotionally. For the women, this need was infantilising, returning them to a childlike state of dependence.

"I kind of felt disappointed in myself that I was the one being minded, in a way. It's the same as ending up pregnant, it's like, you've let yourself down, you know what I mean? Like I never thought that she'd have to mother me, because I was 21 at this stage, so I felt like all my parenting from her was done." ~ Aoife, 28.

In her influential book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristin Luker argues that the ideological differences that separate pro- and anti-choice women are not based on abortion. Rather, “the values that lead pro-life and pro-choice women into different attitudes towards abortion are the same values that led them at an earlier time to adopt different lifestyles that supported a given view of abortion... Their position on abortion is the ‘tip of the iceberg’, a shorthand way of supporting and proclaiming not only a complex set of values but a given set of resources as well.” As women are increasingly able to work and develop a life independent of traditional gender roles of motherhood and family life, abortion has become a debate over the opportunities and power given to women, and the place and meaning of motherhood.

“It was my worst nightmare. My absolute worst nightmare would have been to stay in the village. And when I got pregnant my Mam was like ‘You could get a council house here, I’d look after the baby for you.’ Because I was working in media at the time, I really wanted to be a media person. You know, I’m not even crying over, like having the abortion, I’m crying over like, Jesus, what could have happened but didn’t, you know?”

~ Aoife, 28.

All of the women I interviewed prided themselves on their independence, feminism, and ambitions beyond having a partner and family. Many had moved away from their hometowns to pursue higher education and career opportunities. They described their mothers lovingly but critically as “stuck”, “emotional”, “irrational” – qualities

associated with being childish. Their mother were, they hoped, their polar opposites.

Becoming pregnant threatened these women's sense of themselves as independent, capable women in multiple ways, including the accidental nature of the pregnancy itself.

"You feel like a stupid teenager. You're a grown woman. This isn't supposed to happen to you." ~ Caroline, 42.

However, in conflict with this emotional return to the role as child, as daughter, as dependent, is the deep and repeated desire the women express to protect their mothers from their experience of abortion. This fear of hurting their mothers becomes another deterrent to speaking openly about their abortions, to anyone. Women fear the stigma they face will also attach itself to and harm anyone associated with them.

Bad women get abortions, and bad women must have bad mothers.

But women also choose not to tell the mothers themselves, believing the pain and stress of their abortion will also prove contagious. Even if telling their mothers would alleviate some of their own anxiety or financial struggles or feelings of isolation, the women choose to endure a more difficult experience alone rather than share this burden with their mothers.

They are strong. They can handle it. Their mothers cannot.

“I wanted to protect her from it. I told her later, but I wanted to protect her from it at the time. My Mam had kind of been through enough in her life, you know? I didn’t want to drag her through that quagmire.” ~ Teresa, 28.

As this inner conflict regarding their mothers combines with the social stigma the women battle, the stress of organising and travelling for the abortion and their overall resentment of not being able to procure an abortion easily, women who did tell their mothers that they were pregnant all felt that their relationships with their mother changed as a result. Some experienced a rift with their mothers because they had to borrow money from them and could not quickly pay it back. Some projected their anger at having to ask for any help onto their mothers, and fought. And some women—those whose mothers helped them organise the abortion or travelled with them—associated their mothers with this difficult experience. These women came to withdraw from the daughter/mother relationship as they tried to emotionally recover—an act mirroring the development of an emotionally available child into a withdrawn adolescent fighting for space.

I needed you, but I’m done now. I’m slamming the door. Leave me alone.

“She’d be at me to ring her more and I should, I will ring her more. I should do that. She’s very good to me. But yeah, it did change our relationship. And I think I kind of

backed away from her a lot, after, because she was there when I did it, you know?" ~

Aoife, 28.

The mothers, meanwhile, dutifully played their parts. Some provided money, some emotional support, some expressions of disappointment. Some offered to help their daughters by raising the baby and becoming a mother again; volunteering to step into the mother-shaped space that pregnancy had opened but had been left glaringly empty as their daughters considered abortion instead. And some reasserted their maternal role by infantilizing their adult daughters, perhaps emotionally pulled back to their earlier duties, or showing their daughters what mothers have to do – as an example, or as a warning, or as a show of support.

You don't have to take care of anyone else. I'll take care of you. You're still my daughter.

"My Mam bought pajamas for me for the day and stuff, and slippers like it was some sort...like, you know, hospital appointment. And [after the abortion] she had a sandwich for me, because you weren't allowed to eat anything beforehand. She had a sandwich, and a packet of Scampi fries and Cherry Coke – they were my favourite things. We went on the bus then home, to catch our plane, and we were like, in a rush to catch the plane and I just remember she was like 'never do this to me again' and I was like 'No I won't.'" ~ Aoife, 28.

Sometimes the women later chose to disclose their abortions to their mothers, most commonly as a way to emphasize the personal and political differences between them. These reveals were often aggressive and unplanned, an emotional outburst that ironically returns the women to their familial roles – the mother, shocked and disappointed; the daughter enraged, defiant, rebellious.

I've kept secrets from you. You don't know me. I'm not like you.

"I ended up telling her one night which I kind of regret doing, because she ended up arguing with me and being really pro-life and I just said to her 'Well I've had an abortion.' It just went down like a fucking slap in the face, which was not how I had intended it to be. I really didn't mean to say it like that. She was really... she was saying that anyone who has an abortion is never right again, they're always a bit off, blah blah blah. And I was like 'Mam, where are you getting this from?' And we'd had a bottle of wine – or more - and I ended up just throwing it at her like a slap which was really horrible. I really regret doing it like that. But it is what it is." ~ Teresa,

28.

That abortion inspires such complex feelings and relationship shifts between mothers and daughters makes the absence of fathers in these narratives all the more notable. As all of the women received their informal, home-based education regarding menstruation, puberty and sex only from their mothers, their mothers became central to the women's conceptualization of their sexuality, body and the possibility of pregnancy. Fathers, meanwhile, remained conspicuously - possibly voluntarily and

perhaps unsurprisingly - absent. While mothers actively witnessed and acknowledged their daughter's growth from girl to woman, from child to potential mother, fathers rarely engaged in such explicit awareness of their daughters' development.

"My Dad gave me condoms when I was fifteen, when he was drunk. They had little pigs on the front of them which was so weird. And we didn't talk about it, he was just like 'just have these' and I was like 'okay!' I felt that he was embarrassed by it, I think he was pushed onto doing it by my Mum. He was like 'but you shouldn't be having it', and I wasn't." ~ Aoife, 28.

When women mentioned their fathers, it was most often as abstract figures of authority who can express judgement and exert control. None of the women spoke of telling their fathers about their abortion, of wanting to tell them, of asking them for money, to travel with them, or for emotional support. They didn't worry about how their fathers would react, because their fathers were never going to know. There is a shroud of silence between fathers and daughter regarding their daughters' sexuality, their daughters' maturation, their daughters' growth into women - and so abortion can never be discussed. The roles of father and daughter are never left.

Getting an abortion is not what good little girls do. And no one wants to be a bad daughter.

“I felt embarrassed about how nice the doctor was - he was a man around my Dad’s age and I just kinda felt that sense you feel as a child, y’know, of wanting adults to like you and be pleased with you? As much as I am pro-choice and was then, I definitely felt embarrassment at having gotten pregnant and having to get an abortion. There’s just something about it that makes you feel deeply irresponsible and foolish, even though you can rationalize it and say that accidents happen, it’s impossible for me to shake that instinctive feeling to this day.” ~ Mary, 26.

Some women explicitly spoke of their fathers as allegories for legal control, the authority figure whose motto is “not under my roof”, the patriarch turned patriarchy.

“I do feel I’m treated like a child in this country, I feel like I’m not allowed to have – like – it’s mad that the government can stop me, it’s, it’s, it’s crazy. Like, the government’s not my father – not that my father should stop me, but you know. Jesus Christ, it’s just so terrible. I was never made so aware of being a woman and you get this realisation that things are not the same for you.” ~ Aoife, 28.

Things are not the same for women. Patriarchs love their sons, their boys, their men. Patriarchs love their little girls until they grow into women who will not follow their rules, who will not be controlled.

No wonder fathers became so intrinsically liked with Ireland’s anti-choice government in the women’s minds; they fulfil the same role, metaphorically and

literally. Unlike mothers, whose physical or metaphorical presence evokes women's real experiences of their body, sexuality and potential for motherhood, fathers are law-makers and disciplinarians who represent value systems and rules, who profess their desire to "protect" their biological or national daughters, yet are so removed from their lives that they don't see the pain, don't alleviate it, make it worse by the looming spectre of their judgement, their control, their capacity to punish. By remaining absent yet authoritarian, patriarchal figures ensure that the emotional labour of abortion is experienced solely by women, preventing them from experiencing the understanding and empathy that will allow abortion discourse and legislation to account for the needs and desires of women.

Maybe abortion makes women think of their fathers as abstractions because that's how patriarchy thinks of them, ironically reducing each other to children, vessels and ciphers in a debate supposedly about personhood. Meanwhile, women remain as people to each other because of the relative lack of a power divide between them, and so their interactions around abortion and navigations of control and protection remain rooted in their personal and familial relationships.

Mothers and daughters can engage in this exchange of authority because at some point, they are willing to acknowledge and submit to each other's power, safe in the knowledge that the exchange will be ongoing. Meanwhile, patriarchal figures refuse to give women control over their own bodies, ensuring their roles of father and child remain embedded and embodied.

There will be no new script.

Article 3

Ireland, Abortion and Exile

In January 2016, a new hashtag emerged on Irish social media. #FaceThe8th asked Irish women who have had abortions to contribute photos and testimonials to a new pro-choice site. The aim was to wrest abortion discourse from the realm of the abstract and bring the women affected by abortion to the fore.

The tag was started by the X-ile project [[Link to X-ile website⁴](#)], an ongoing online gallery of women who have had abortions outside of Ireland and Northern Ireland. X-ile's objective is "to give a much-needed face to women who have effectively been exiled from Ireland and ignored due to unduly restrictive abortion laws." X-ile's name is a pointed reference to the fact that Ireland's laws don't prevent Irish women from having abortions, but force them to leave the country in order to do so.

And they do. Between January 1980 and December 2014, at least 161,987 women living in Ireland travelled to the UK to access abortion services. The most recent figures available show that in 2014, 3,735 women in Ireland travelled to the UK to access abortion services. [[Link to Irish Family Planning Association statistics.⁵](#)]

That's ten Irish women a day who are forced to leave their country to exercise control over their bodies; ten Irish women a day who have to leave their homeland to receive care. Ten Irish women a day whose experience of travelling for an abortion affects not

only their relationship with Ireland, but also their ideas about space, home, movement and community and both personal and political levels. Ten Irish women a day who, as they are forced to leave, question where they belong.

The Irish women I spoke to about their experience of travelling to the UK for an abortion all expressed that being forced to travel for an abortion didn't just transform an act they were personally comfortable with into an undertaking marked by emotional, professional and financial stress. Being forced to travel also left them with complex and conflicting feelings regarding Ireland and their sense of citizenship in not only the nation, but smaller communities such as their hometowns, feminist circles and the political landscape of Ireland, marked as it is by divisive discourse regarding abortion.

Conditional Citizenship

"I was really angry and really upset that I was being forced to – you know, I was going to have to take time off work, I was going to have to find the money to do it, you know, all of that made me really, really pissed off and really upset. That was the worst part of the whole process." ~ Rachel, 38.

For all the women I interviewed, having a baby would have meant sacrificing their independence, and bringing their life plans to a halt—becoming stuck, stagnant. For many, like Rachel, these constrictions would be geographical, financial, professional and personal: to get the support necessary for them to raise a child, they would have to

surrender their careers, education or ambitions and move back to the hometowns and families they had grown out of and moved away from. Not being able to have an abortion would have involved diminishing aspects of their lives they value dearly: independence, freedom, personal fulfilment.

Anti-choice discourse posits that this is the price women who becomes pregnant must pay, and this attitude is neither new nor unique to Ireland. Kristin Luker, author of the 1985 book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, analysed the demographics and values of pro- and anti-choice activists in the United States. Luker found that abortion discourse uses ideas of personhood and embryonic rights as a veil to conceal the ideals of gender and womanhood that actually define the abortion debate.

“Women who oppose abortion and seek to make it officially unavailable are declaring, both practically and symbolically, that women’s reproductive roles should be given social primacy,” writes Luker. “Once an embryo is defined as a child and an abortion as the death of a person, almost everything else in a woman’s life must ‘go on hold’ during the course of her pregnancy: any attempt to gain ‘male’ resources such as a job, an education, or other skills must be subordinated to her uniquely female responsibility of serving the needs of this newly conceived person... women’s non-reproductive roles are made secondary to their reproductive roles.”

Ireland's anti-abortion laws similarly create a form of conditional citizenship, where women who do not adhere to the idea that women's reproductive roles are primary must leave the country to procure an abortion, and keep it a secret – or be punished. By temporarily exiling women who choose to have abortions, Ireland shows them that their desire for bodily and personal autonomy will not be tolerated on their home shores. If women want to be bad citizens, they'll have to go elsewhere.

"I think it was hugely unfair that I had to travel and leave the country, I think it added to – I mean, I'm being flippant about it, but it was an incredibly stressful situation and it added to an already stressful situation. It added hugely to the cost as well, but even just the physical getting there and being in strange country and you know, the organisation that that took. I'm resentful that that happened." ~ Joanna, 42.

Ironically, by outlawing abortion, Ireland temporarily transforms these women into what the women trying to avoid. By making them undertake an expensive and stigmatized journey, Ireland compels these women put their careers and education on hold as they take time off to travel and often become financially and emotionally dependent on others. It is these facets of the experience, and not the abortion itself, that proved the most difficult and draining for all of my interviewees.

By forcing Irish women to leave Ireland, anti-abortion laws don't make women question their decision to abort their pregnancy. Instead, Ireland unwittingly re-

enforces the fact that for these women, being a good Irish citizen just isn't worth it, and leaving – even temporarily – is the only option.

Home Country, Hometowns

“A lot of my friends there were having kids when they were young, and it was very hard. Because I totally saw that as ‘Oh you're fucked, you're staying here.’ I'd feel really bad for them, and I didn't want that to happen to me at all. It was my worst nightmare. [Starts crying.] My absolute worst nightmare would have been to stay in the village. And when I got pregnant my Mam was like ‘You could get a council house here, I'd look after the baby for you’... You know, I'm not even crying over, like having the abortion, I'm crying over like, Jesus, what could have happened but didn't, you know?” ~Aoife, 28.

For many women, leaving Ireland to procure an abortion was a way of ensuring they would not have to return to their hometowns, places defined in these women's minds by a lack of opportunities and symbolising a lack of independence or personal progress. For others, their hometowns presented real and dangerous threats; having a baby would mean being forced to live amongst this trauma and violence every day.

Aoife, 28, grew up in a village in the Midlands. Growing up in a council estate, Aoife and her female friends experienced prejudice from the more privileged members of her community; sons of wealthier local farmers would enact this privilege by harassing and sexually assaulting her and her peers – girls who were

underage, presumed promiscuous or uneducated, and perceived as not having a future beyond their council estate. The girls and women were deemed less worthy than their male peers, and their rights to consent and bodily autonomy were ignored.

Aoife's rape at age 17 was far from an unusual event.

“My village was horrible, just disgusting. The lads were rapists, and a lot of statutory shit going on, it was so bad. Like, my friend gave a guy a blow-job, and she was on anti-psychotic meds at the time, and he went up to her father in the pub and told her father - she was fifteen at the time – ‘Your daughter is really really good at giving head.’ You know what I mean? Isn't that crazy? So my village was disgusting. It was so common. Like, I'd go at a house party, and I'd wake up, and a guy's dick would be in the back of my jeans and I'd just be like ‘What the fuck are you at?’ It was so common. It was like, they would just push to see how far they would get with you, just to see.” ~ Aoife, 28.

When Aoife became pregnant after a one-night several years later, she confronted the dichotomy of exile and movement that comes with abortion. Having an abortion meant being temporarily rejected by and forced out of your country, while remaining pregnant represented being stuck in a place and lifestyle that feels stifling, claustrophobic, and enforced. The choice was easy for Aoife: leaving Ireland for an abortion was bearable; living in a place where her body and person would be under constant attack was not.

While for Aoife this choice manifested itself on the smaller scale of her hometown, the choice between a temporary exile and a life sentence of having one's body and person dismissed, threatened and controlled by men is the choice facing all Irish women who choose to have an abortion.

"I think I always felt rejected by my smaller community anyway, but I felt rejected by Ireland. Like, I can't tell anyone publicly that I've had an abortion. I can't, like. I think I'm more than a person who've had an abortion, but I feel that people would just see me as just that... It makes me so confused about Ireland." ~ Aoife, 28.

Sites of Care

"It was a very nice clinic, very posh...I was brought into a room that was like a spa, reminded me of a beauty spa, because it had comfy chairs with blankets." ~ Joanna, 42.

"So you're sitting there, and there's probably three or four other women in that recovery room, and there's some nurses giving out tea and toast. And again, there's a funny kind of comradery as well because you've all been through this. Yeah, I was just delighted, you know. I recovered really quickly." ~ Rachel, 38.

All of the women who had surgical abortions expressed surprise at how comfortable the abortion clinics were, and how well they were treated. Given the silence and stigma that surrounds abortion in Ireland and the pervasively negative portrayals of

abortion in popular culture, the women's initial trepidation is understandable. Surgical abortions are fast and simple procedures, and when regulated are one of the safest medical procedures available. In the United States, the statistical risk of death from an abortion is virtually zero, while the risk of major complications is 0.02%. [Link to Guttmacher figures.⁶] However, onscreen, abortion is a fraught, dangerous, and often deadly plot point, and films and television shows repeatedly show abortion as a lethal procedure, and the abortion clinic as a site of physical and emotional trauma.

This phenomenon of misrepresentation has been examined by researchers in the University of California, San Francisco. In 2014, Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport undertook a quantitative analysis of over 300 abortion storylines in American television and film between 1916 and 2013 and found that the storylines differed from real-life statistics in significant ways. [Link to study.⁷] Fourteen percent of plotlines included the death of a woman who considered getting an abortion, whether or not she obtained one. About 5 percent of fictional women died because of medical complications of the abortion, and about 20 percent of characters face major consequences such as infection, haemorrhage, hysterectomy, depression, and infertility. Given that misinformation about abortion is the rule, such misrepresentations matter.

"I feel like when people have abortions on TV or films, they're often punished for it, there's often some retribution that comes after it. Even, you know, there's often some kind of tragedy that befalls them... And it's all those secret abortions, you know, when

people run up to the waiting room where people go 'Don't do this! You don't have to do this!' It's crazy. I've never seen...I'm trying to think, has there ever been anything in Ireland, do you think, around abortion? I know there's an abortion in Dirty Dancing, but I've never seen Dirty Dancing. Or it's the 1950s, all hot water bottles and soap, stuff like that." ~ Aoife, 28.

The women I interviewed certainly remembered these representations. Most cited the film *Dirty Dancing* in which the character Penny is left ill, traumatised and screaming in pain after an illegal abortion described as consisting of a “dirty knife and a folding table.” Other popular and critically acclaimed films that address abortion include *Vera Drake*, *Revolutionary Road*, *The Cider House Rules* and *4 Months 3 Weeks 2 Days*. Even when these films offer pro-choice narratives that sympathise with their female characters’ decision to terminate their pregnancies, their representation of the actual abortion procedures perpetuate the idea that abortions are violent, backstreet and often lethal.

“There is a kind of a... mythology, we'll say around abortion, you know, depictions of you know, you know, people going through horrific kinds of abortions with needles and... you think about the stories that you've heard from years gone by about how people had abortions and how they were horrific – my experience wasn't that. You'd like to see a character like me, who goes in, has it, comes out, and is fine.” ~ Rachel,

38.

Even those onscreen representations of modern-day abortions that feminists celebrate avoid the physical experience of the procedure. As viewers, we might see the prologue and epilogue to the abortion, while never following the character to the clinic for the procedure, like Betty's discussed but unseen abortion in *Friday Night Lights*. Frequently, we get as far as the waiting room, only to pick up with the character on the drive home, as seen in *Parenthood*. Rarely, we might enter an operating room (which is, to say the least, not what most clinics look like) only to have the screen fade to black before the abortion begins, like in *E.R.* or *Grey's Anatomy*; shows which certainly never shied away from showing a medical procedure of any other stripe. By never showing a safe abortion procedure onscreen, popular culture keeps abortion shrouded in mystery and fear, refusing to offer women the promise of safety or even the comfort of basic information.

"I suppose on some levels I expected it to be more traumatic than it was in reality? In terms of the clinic being grim, or not being treated well, or maybe it being painful. But the staff were fantastic, and I was never made to feel uncomfortable and the procedure was not in the least physically gruelling." ~ Mary, 26.

Given the stigma facing them at home and the constant representation of abortion as dangerous and traumatic, it's perhaps unsurprising that the women I interviewed all expected to be confronted with an atmosphere of punishment and isolation, rather than the respect, empathy and comradery offered to them in the abortion clinics. While they were all satisfied with and grateful for the care they received in UK abortion clinics, their undue and unnecessary fear of the abortion clinic and the

procedure further added to the stress of their experience, heightening their resentment for their country that refused to offer them care, safety or reassurance.

Unwelcome Home

“I now can't bear the conversation – it's not even a conversation, it's never a conversation - but I can't bear whenever the abortion question comes up. I find it so difficult to listen to, just because of the anger I feel about what I had to do to get an abortion, the toll this country forced on me.” ~ Joanna, 42.

The women I interviewed said their view of and relationship with

Ireland changed upon

their return from the UK. The sense of isolation, stigma and rejection wrought by their having to leave the country to get an abortion manifested itself in various ways.

The stigma and prejudice that Ireland's anti-abortion laws produce led some women to withdraw from people and communities they believed contribute to anti-abortion rhetoric. Some women began avoiding anti-choice family members, while others severed all connection to and interaction with the Catholic Church.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, many women became less political and less involved with pro-choice activism and debate, having been left so jaded by the lack of care and representation offered to them by Ireland and the abstract and politicized discourse about abortion that felt so alien to their experience.

“I just kind of, I ... just get a bit exhausted by it. I hope it changes, I really do, and maybe it’s kind of selfish for me not to get more involved but I think I – and I was lucky that I was able to go somewhere and have something done about it. But I don’t feel engaged – because of those two crazy factions that you have, that just hijack everything and just turn it into ... they make it into something completely uncivilised. And that’s the shame, that there’s no real grown-up talk about it. It just turns into this crazy speak.” ~ Joanna, 42.

Some women described seeking out the personal and political support offered to them by feminists and pro-choice campaigners, and found literal and emotional community by engaging with feminist literature, indicating that abortion can act as a gateway to landscapes of acceptance.

But while these landscapes may exist the women still live in a larger nation that does not recognise or represent their experiences, and more women expressed frustration with and disdain for a country that fails to support them. Even their supposed allies disappointed. The women noted that many pro-choice activists still avoid supporting average women who choose to have abortions, instead focusing on the more politically palatable cases of women whose desire for abortion is due to tragic circumstances such as rape, the mother’s ill health or foetal abnormalities.

“I find any discussion of abortion law in Ireland intensely frustrating to listen to because I just don’t feel that significant change is going to happen in my lifetime, so I almost prefer just not to think about it anymore. I’m not saying that’s the correct way to approach it, and I admire the women here who are engaged in activism, but – and speaking only for myself - I can’t personally invest myself in it because it upsets me how futile it seems. What I hate most about the discussion in Ireland is that it’s so backwards here, so far behind, that like, even pro-choice people often have to fall back on worst-case scenarios to try to convince people to change the law... it feels demoralizing.” ~ Mary, 26.

Women who leave Ireland to procure abortions may be free to return as citizens, but as their relationship with Ireland remains altered by the experience, it’s clear that anti-abortion laws deeply affect their perception of their home country and their place in it.

You might come back to Ireland, but you can’t go home again.

Article 4

Ambiguity and Ambivalence: The Women, The Research, The Writer

Conscious and Unconscious Emotion

“I didn’t leave it too long to take a test, when I got the inclination that that’s kind of, what it might be. (I shouldn’t be the one to speak first. Neither should the theorists. For once, these women should have the first and last word on their experience.) I just switched into that mode of ‘Right, I need to be on my A-game here’, you know? Like I said, to be fucking kind to myself, (Having an abortion doesn’t feel kind) to not go down that – because I knew that if I allowed myself to get upset about it, it would... it would just be a complete - a mess.

(Acknowledging the possibility of ambiguity’s existence.) So I just said, you know, now’s the time to be strong (Can a person decide to feel something?) and you know (Can I decide to feel empathy?), to be as proactive and rational as – rational was the word I kept using, you know ‘let’s be rational about this.’ Yeah.” ~ Rachel, 38.

How do I be kind to these women? Is that even my job? Allowing them space for ambiguity feels kind – but kindness can be patronising; the soft voice, the “you poor thing” head-

tilt. Maybe they need strong, asserting nods of agreement instead.

“I got a bit, I dunno why, I went a bit funny (Intense moment left unexplored. Ambiguity of emotion, not even regret, but still resisted) – I got a bit funny afterwards, I just started going ‘Is it out, is it out?’ And I don’t know why, like it wasn’t the product of rape or anything like that, which I’ve always been really confused about, to this day. Like I just really wanted it done and dusted and gone... I was confused about my own reaction. Because I was trying to get up off the table at that stage, and she was saying ‘No you can’t get up, you have to stay where you are for a while’ and I just wanted to get off the table, I wanted not to be lying there anymore with my legs in stirrups. And she was like ‘okay fine, go on, go sit in the chair over there’ or something’ so I sat there for a while... because I’m curious about it myself (She intellectualises her experience, expressing that she’s “curious” about her feelings rather than affected by them), because I hadn’t thought anything like that up until that moment. (Can you choose to focus on positive emotions and leave negative emotions

“The white space between details overwhelms whatever significance they were supposed to bear, whatever pleasure they were meant to provide.” ~ Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*, 155.

“Empson defined ambiguity as, any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.” ~ Ashley L. Stone, Ming Tai-Seale, Cheryl D. Stults, Jamie M. Luiz, Richard M. Frankel, *Three Types of Ambiguity in Coding Empathic Interactions in Primary Care Visits*, 63.

“Identifying emotional cues that constitute ‘empathic opportunities’ is a complex task... ambiguities made this task particularly challenging: presentations of emotional cues can be ‘fuzzy’ and varied.” ~ *Three Types of Ambiguity in Coding Empathic Interactions in Primary Care Visits*, 63.

“Ambiguity or ‘uncertainty about uncertainties’ is a pervasive element of much real world decision making.” ~ Hillel J. Einhorn and Robin M. Hogarth, *Decision Making Under Ambiguity*, 227.

behind? We accept this framework when it's instructional, when involves cognitive behavioural therapy or affirmations or esteem building; but if a person expresses their own ability to do so it's assumed pathology, denial or repression.) I remember thinking it was quite a strange reaction myself, then I remember thinking 'God, they're going to think I was raped or something, you know, and that I feel this strongly about, you know, the foetus or whatever, but it wasn't that so I don't know. I imagine that it was just... (Intellectualism and rationality is gendered and pitched against feminine emotion. In rejecting the pregnancy and emotion, they reject stereotypes of femininity.) I imagine it was just... that I probably had been a lot more stressed out about it than I thought I was. I kind of pride myself of being laid-back sometimes, so it probably just manifested itself at those moments afterwards or whatever.'" ~ Joanna, 44.

Does this research feel more feminine, and thus more feminist than journalism, more aligned with emotion and exploration rather than the cold rational reporting of journalism? It's hard news versus soft research.

"As I mentioned, even with the fertility treatments...it's like... it hits you at the strangest times, you're just sitting there and you've got tears running down your face (Emotion occurring but unexplored. Is this repression or resistance? Is she not engaging because it would be too painful, or refusing to engage showing that women can live with moments of emotional distress and not be defined by them?) – not sobbing or anything, but you're just going 'Jesus what's going on in my head that I don't even know what is happening. But, it's some kind of show of something.'" ~ Joanna, 44.

Or does the interpretation and questioning of women's testimony feel masculine, feel like those panels, feel like a betrayal? Feels heightened because I haven't had an abortion – I'm another person turning their experience into tools for my project, my own show of something.

Ambiguity and Identity Formation

"I didn't want to be with that person I'd had sex with, either. It sounds so stupid, but if I was pregnant with a guy, when I was that age, that I loved, I dunno whether I would have...I dunno. I think I would have, (Allowing for ambiguity under different circumstances. Is imagining themselves

"A violated woman is expected to fall apart, and not just privately, either; she must disintegrate publicly, in front of friends, in front of professionals, in front of Starbucks. It satiates our craving for arena- style pathos. We want to cheer our gladiators for bravery while they hack themselves to bits in the ring. If a woman chooses not to play, but to find her own private way back, we say she's 'in denial.' If we don't see her fragment, we say that she's not 'dealing with it.' We award no respect to women who draw a line in the sand and say, 'I will not go down for you.' We either treat them as emotionless or we minimize the importance of their experience because we have not been privy to their personal dark nights. The belief that a cathartic experience is necessary for sanity and healing must be questioned. I have seen some women push back on the victim. It becomes her fault for not being spiritually developed enough to crack. Until she cracks, she can't forgive, and until she forgives, she will never be fully healed. Breaking itself has become the goal." ~ Vanessa Vaselka, *The Collapsible Woman*.

"What is morphology anyway? I looked it up and found this: 'The study of the shape or form of things.' Which is how we keep something trapped in its place: we give it a form." ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 71.

under different circumstances a way of projecting a perceived desire for uncomplex, solution-based answers onto a hypothetical, instead of expressing it now? Allows them not to commit to their ambiguity) but I think I would have been very second-thoughty about it, very dramatic. (Is imagining myself under myself under different circumstances a way of projecting a perceived desire for uncomplex, solution-based answers onto a hypothetical? If I were just a researcher I'd do this; if I were just a journalist I'd do this. Resisting both roles allows me to commit to my ambiguity.) So it was just very clear-cut for me why I wanted to do it. It was just crazy for me that people had travelled from the Isle of Man and stuff. And Northern Ireland – I thought they had abortions in Northern Ireland and stuff. But the girl from the Isle of Man, she was like sixteen or something like that, she was very young. She didn't even have to say why she didn't want a baby. Because I was like 21, I thought 'My friends have had babies younger than that'(Sense of self is always crystallized by comparison to another; we're not worthy of abortion because someone more vulnerable is; we're treating this rationally because someone else is getting emotional. We're different. We're different), like there was no excuse for me, I wasn't too young." ~ Aoife, 28.

Sense of myself is always crystallized by comparison to another; I'm not like other journalists. I'm not like other researchers. I'm different. I'm different.

"When I found out I told my boyfriend by phone. I knew immediately I was going to have an abortion. I think he offered some sort of assurance that he would support whatever choice I made, but there was no, like, decision making process - the only process was having to sort out the practicalities. I didn't even consider keeping... I felt totally disgusted by being pregnant and like I just wanted it to be over as soon as possible... I felt strongly that I would do literally anything not to have to have the baby - including injuring myself. (She adheres to the narrative demanded by Irish legislation) I knew I wasn't going to have it no matter what happened...I felt a kind of instinctive... I would say almost animalistic panic when I found out that I was pregnant, (performing the emotional trauma and self-harming ideation demanded of women) which made my mind very focused and sharp. I could imagine nothing worse than having to carry the baby to term... (Feeling the way the State requires you to may feel less isolating, imagining that they would

"Empathy's 'ambiguity is manifested in coming to terms simultaneously with the other's likeness to oneself and her/his irreducible strangeness, otherness.'" ~ Brenda Jo Brueggeman, Marian E. Lupo, *Analogy and Empathy*, 115.

"Whatever we can't hold, we hang on a hook that will hold it." ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 11.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live." ~ Joan Didion.

"This insistence upon a unified self seems to testify inadvertently to its inverse, a sense of the self rising up in revolt. The insistence codes as an attempt to dispel a lurking sense of the body's treachery; a sense of sickness as mutiny. The disease must be turned into an other so that it can be properly battled." ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 42.

"The social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, and their role in the political process." ~ Plummer 1995: 19.

possibly support you; that you're not being exiled to the U.K. to have an abortion, you're merely choosing to go because you don't want to have to testify) **This made me think, very consciously and clearly, that if I couldn't realistically get an abortion in the normal manner, I would attempt to get rid of it myself by whatever means were necessary.** (The panel system forces an extreme of suicide, demanding not only that ambiguity be solved, but solved in the direction of termination— either the pregnancy or the woman) **Like, I googled ways to do this, etc.” ~ Mary, 26.**

Questioning women's certainty around pregnancy and suicidal or self-harm ideation demands they hurt themselves as proof. Similar to the rhetoric of the “real” depressive, the “real” rape victim, the only thing she can do to prove her case is to present as a dead body.

“It was absolutely fine... It was really straightforward I was fine with it. (The ambiguity denied by the women doesn't just apply to any doubts surrounding their decision to abort, but by the emotions evoked by the experience – or not.) **I was fine with it.” ~ Rachel, 38.**

“I just wanted it done. I had considered myself not pregnant from then on, (If she wasn't pregnant, she wouldn't be able to mourn terminating a pregnancy. If sentimentality is unearned emotion, she's rescinding her right to emotion by denying the event that would earn her the right to emotion) **do you know what I mean?” ~ Aoife, 28.**

“Since, I have not, I mean I don't think I've shed a tear over it, I think I've framed it in a certain way where I decided I was not in a position to have a baby with someone I was not in a relationship with. It was actually very clear to sort that out.” ~ Rachel, 38.

“I don't feel guilty at all...I actually feel guilty for the lack of guilt I have, it's crazy.” ~ Aoife, 28.

When ambiguity is associated with guilt, regret, lifelong emotional torment and mental health issues, ambiguity transforms from a natural and even necessary facet of experience and emotion into a threat. And like many threats against the virtue of purity of women, the subject becomes taboo - out of speech, out of mind; non-existent until uttered, a force that only manifests upon expression, like a curse. These women will not express any ambiguity, lest they be damned.

“I had a very strong sense of ‘This is something that I am okay with, that I have made a decision about this a long time ago, that I think this is an acceptable thing to do

“Intolerance of ambiguity has been defined as ‘the tendency to resort to black-white solutions, to arrive at premature closure as to evaluative aspects, often at the neglect of reality...’ (4, p. 115). The individual who is intolerant of ambiguity tends to categorize phenomena rather than to order them in a continuum. There is a tendency to precipitate judgment, both in perception and cognition. The theoretical explanation is that this individual feels acutely insecure in ambiguous situations, and hence tends to structure ambiguity prematurely, or at least sooner than individuals more tolerant of ambiguity.” ~ Eugene E. Levitt, *Studies in Intolerance of Ambiguity*, 263.

“When evaluating decisions under uncertainty, two components have traditionally been examined: the relative desirability of the possible payoffs and the relative likelihood of the events affecting the payoffs. When we consider the effect of ambiguity in this research, we are adding a third dimension, the nature of the information-or as Ellsberg (1961) writes, ‘the ambiguity of the information, a quality depending on the amount, type, reliability, and ‘unanimity’ of information and giving rise to one's degree of ‘confidence’ in the estimate of relative likelihoods.’” ~ Barbara E. Kahn and Rakesh K. Sarin, *Modeling Ambiguity in Decisions Under Uncertainty*, 266.

emm... (Repetition, re-asserting; who is she trying to convince here?)

So I'm not going to buy into all the other kind of psychodrama that goes with it. To me, it is not about a human being. At that point, it's cells. It is cells, that's it.

(Maybe feelings can be constructed of the way they are spoken, acknowledged, expressed)

So you know, all the other propaganda that goes with it is not applicable at this point."

~ Rachel, 38

If I reduce these stories to the explicit – "these women express no feelings of ambiguity regarding their abortion" – it's bad academic research. If I stress the implicit – "these women feel unexpressed ambiguity regarding their abortion" – it's bad journalism. I will express ambiguity, lest I be damned.

"I was asking her like, 'I'm really happy with this decision, like I think this is the right decision for me, em, you know, it's come very naturally to me and everything, but I'm a little worried about years down the line, because anything I've read – magazine articles and news articles and everything – they're all from women talking about being absolutely devastated and how it affected the rest of their lives and how they never got over it', and I was kind of saying 'you know, is that going to happen to me, like am I going to be in emotional turmoil and years from now am I going to regret it?' (The grasping for some kind of precedent demonstrates uncertainty of how to act without social cues, as well as the desire to be reassured that outcome will be positive) and 'I don't know' was basically the answer. And I said 'Well you've obviously dealt with lots of women, like what's the general feeling?' and she wasn't able to tell me. And I remember feeling, and still do, that I thought it was a real shame (A disappointment here that she's trying to correct, taking on the role of the woman who has knowledge, who can tell other women what they will feel. Is the lived experience of retelling more important than the lived experience? It offers more comfort, sets a precedent that others can follow while also allowing one to construct self-identity and experience) – like, I wish I had known that there was plenty of women who do this and they don't have any problems or issues with it, and it was the right thing for them to do at that particular time, and I just wanted to do that." ~ Joanna, 44.

Journalism and research have both been disappointing because of their stubbornly maintained binary and exclusivity. I want to set a new precedent while also allowing myself to construct the self-identity of the person who broke down the binary.

"If ambiguity aversion is driven by the feeling of incompetence, the question arises as to what conditions produce this state of mind. We propose that people's confidence is undermined when they contrast their limited knowledge about an event with their superior knowledge about another event, or when they compare themselves with more knowledgeable individuals. Moreover, we argue that this contrast between states of knowledge is the predominant source of ambiguity aversion." ~ Craig R. Fox and Amos Tversky, *Ambiguity Aversion and Comparative Ignorance*, 587.

"There are reasons to expect biases in self-evaluations. First, persons may be more likely to evaluate themselves favourable in order to maintain their self-esteem. Second, the general attitude that persons have about themselves may affect how they evaluate themselves on particular characteristics... We expect that the more ambiguous a characteristic, the more these biases are likely to operate. It is difficult to ignore information about performances that are clear-cut. However, when performances are ambiguous, they give people the opportunity to either evaluate themselves more favourably, or the way they usually do. In other words, people are likely to see either what they want to see or what they expect to see, based on their self-esteem." ~ Richard B. Felson, *Ambiguity And Bias In The Self-Concept*, 64.

“I think I was proud of myself in a way, in that I’d been able to get through it in, you know, an efficient manner, and I hadn’t lost the plot (of the narrative she’s created for herself?) and I hadn’t allowed it to you know, to really divert me, should I say, from my life, and that I was able to do it, and keep my shit together, and move on. And I was able to not lie awake at night thinking about a foetus that I had, you know, murdered [laughs] (laughing because this is ridiculous, or to make it seem so?) – that I was able to, able to rationalise it. So I felt good about it.” ~ Rachel, 38

What these women are conveying in these narratives is not just their experience of abortion, but who they are. They can’t be ambiguous about their abortion because that would mean being ambiguous about themselves. These are not women who are ambiguous. They are women who resist. They are women who are rational. They are women who are practical. They are women who survive.

“I was sitting there saying ‘This was never, ever supposed to happen to me’ and he said ‘Well who is it supposed to happen to?’ (Someone else) and I was like, ‘yeah I know.’” ~ Joanna, 44.

What if I can’t make this work. I’m supposed to be able to make this work.

Master Identities

“And I didn’t want to be a victim, (Fear of Master Identity) I didn’t want people to feel sorry for me or anything like that. Not a victim, but you know. I didn’t want it to be another part of my story. (But it is) Because I didn’t think it was.” ~ Joanna, 44.

When abortion-as-trauma, and abortion-as-guilt narratives are presented as lifelong, all-consuming and permanent, any ambiguity must feel incredibly threatening – but forces them to adopt another lifelong narrative, that of no ambiguity. Though weight and stakes are different, it’s still a lifelong career in emotional labour. They’re still a victim, but of something different.

“I’d be afraid of just being known as the person who had an abortion, and that’s all. Because that girl, I can’t remember what her occupation was, do you know? (Feeling my own guilt of not being able to show more of the women’s lives.) All I remember is that she had an abortion and went public with it.” ~ Aoife, 28.

I have to give these women a context.

“How could it be anything but the truth? Why would somebody speak words they didn’t mean? ‘Western culture,’ says literary theorist peter Brooks, has made confessional speech a prime ark of authenticity, par excellence the kind of speech in which an individual authenticates his inner truth” ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 165.

“Master status is the social position that is the primary identifying characteristic of an individual. It is defined as ‘a status that has exceptional importance for social identity, often shaping a person’s entire life.’” ~ John Scott, Gordon Marshall, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 399.

“We watch a character define himself entirely through what he will not claim.” ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 121.

“I wonder if my empathy as always been like this, in every case: just a bout of hypothetical self-pity projected onto someone else. Is this ultimately just solipsism? ... Empathy isn’t just something that happens

“I had been a very independent and superficially ‘mature’ teenager who definitely never turned to [my mother] or needed her for anything (rejecting mother, rejecting motherhood), so having to confess (needing something as a transgression) that I had slipped up so monumentally and needed her to get me out of it was horrible.”

to us – a meteor shower synapses firing across the brain – it’s also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It’s made of exertion, the dowdier cousin of impulse.” ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 23.

Memory and Ambiguity

“They explained what the procedure was going to be. Eh, yes they did. They were very, they were very good about it. Now to be honest, I forget the details (Questioning my own assumption that she should remember this, that her forgetting is indicative of a performance of apathy, or a deliberate choice to block out the details), I was probably like... I didn’t commit them to memory, I was just like ‘Yeah, grand, whatever’ to whatever they said, I don’t know what they do or...I actually forget what they do, I can’t remember if it was chemical or what... (Feeling that the description of the procedure should be so evocative that the details would remain; but that plays into the idea that the procedure itself is different to any other medical procedure; that as well as enduring the stress and emotional labour of this experience, she should also commit medical jargon to memory) But it was fine, like I say, it was a medical procedure and it was cells (politics of word choice; ‘cells’ over ‘foetus’, ‘foetus’ over ‘baby’) that I did not want in my body, so whatever they had to do to get them out (maybe the lack of control or knowledge she had over becoming pregnant makes it easier to surrender control of the abortion) is fine with me.” ~ Rachel, 36.

We can’t choose to forget something, but we can keep the experience as vague as possible as to promote forgetting. Avoiding the details, so that they might dissolve, like a dream, or a story about someone else.

“The word ‘memory’ has at least two meanings: in the first place, it may mean the mere ability to repeat, in the second, it may mean a way of knowing...Memory is fallible and it would perhaps be more accurate to call memory opinion rather than knowledge” ~ Raphael Demos, *Memory as Knowledge of the Past*, 397-404.

“The dependence of memory on personal identity is of a contingent rather than a logical kind. Memory presupposes personal identity only when the memory content involves an indexical reference to the rememberer. Marya Schechtman’s paper ‘Memory and Identity’ is a rich and sophisticated defense of the logical dependence of memory and personal identity. On her view which I label constitutive holism, “the content of memories depends at least in part on their place in a broader psychological context, and so that some content will necessarily be lost when a memory is transplanted into an alien psychology.” ~ Sven Bernecker, *Further Thoughts On Memory: Replies to Schechtman, Adams and Goldberg*, 109-110

“My nose was broken. The bones of the bridge got shifted. The flesh swelling like it was trying to hide the fracture underneath. This is how speech swells around memory. How intellect swells around hurt.” ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 73.

Ambiguity and Public Discourse

“She was interviewing this lady who had an abortion and was very open about it. She wasn’t interrogating her (expectation of cross-examination, of prosecution) but I feel at one point she felt like she needed to give some semblance of balance, you know? By going ‘Do you regret this?’ to satisfy the [anti-choice campaigner] Cora Sherlocks or whatever. (When laws and culture demand that women feel regret, their emotions can’t be examined without it feeling accusatory) Because you can’t have an interview on RTE or TV3 or Irish radio or anything where you go ‘I had an abortion and am perfectly grand about it.’ And if you’re not questioned on that, it’s ‘bias’, it’s ‘media bias.’ Ugh. It drives me crazy, it drives me fucking crazy.” ~ Aoife, 28.

“What I hate most about the discussion in Ireland is that it’s so backwards here (looking back, looking at memory of country and women), so far behind, that like, even pro-choice people often have to fall back on worst-case scenarios (Even pro-choice campaigns lacking ambiguity, as a choice to seem more palatable) to try to convince people to change the law. You always have to present the hypothetical abortion as being performed on a teenage rape victim, or a woman in a coma, or a victim of incest. And, like, I understand why it’s safer to present those things as arguments (it’s also safer for the women to present best-case scenarios of no ambiguity. They’re also participating in safe presentations) because they’re probably the most likely to sway people who are mildly religious and on the fence about it. But it feels demoralizing that you can’t just say that you trust women to decide when they want

“Democracy is categorised by three elements which are similar to those of the media. These three elements show themselves clearly in the political definition of democracy and also within our experience with what we call the media. They are exclusion, privilege, and maleness.” ~ Patricia McFadden, *Examining myths of a Democratic Media*, 653.

“Some cover questions ask the respondent for a sort of moral permission or go-ahead: ‘Would it be all right for a woman to do this if . . .,’ while others, such as the NORC General Social Survey, have posed the propriety of the abortion decision in legal terms: ‘. . . tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if ...’ Blake (1971) has viewed such slight changes in wording as a threat to comparability from survey to survey but we can also fault the questions for not changing enough! Abortion as a political issue has shown a dynamic capacity to take on novel dimensions and unexpected tangents. Yet as the issue has been changing, survey researchers have become increasingly committed to standardized questions. Static attitudinal items and shifting attitudes are a good recipe for error, as survey results coincide less and less with real world events; Blake and del Pinal acknowledge the error, concluding that the reasons why people are pro-Life or pro-Choice are ‘almost entirely an ideological matter’ (1980:41). Yet no survey attempts to tap these elusive ideologies!” ~ Gregory Casey, *Intensive Analysis of a "Single" Issue: Attitudes on Abortion*, 100.

to get an abortion and if that's because they just don't want to be pregnant or have a child, then that's fine." ~ Mary, 26.

Lack of allowance for ambiguity means that even allies are failing these women. Making the arguments politically palatable, not personally representative, alienates them further. We must do better.

"What kinds of reality are considered prerequisites for compassion? ... Reality means something different to everyone here." ~ *The Empathy Exams*, 4

The One Certainty

"And it's stupid, because there's no one way, to feel about this thing at all, you know?" ~ Aoife,

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