ABSTRACT

RECLAIMING ABORTION POLITICS THROUGH REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE: THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF ABORTION COUNTERNARRATIVES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

by Emily Jane O'Brien

This thesis argues that the emergence of the reproductive justice (RJ) framework in reproductive politics not only shifted activist strategies and discourses, but also fostered the emergence and circulation of more complex abortion representations in U.S. popular culture. I examine these (still)-emergent counter-hegemonic reproductive justice abortion counternarratives as potentially transformational interventions in both RJ theory and activist practice. Chapter 1 introduces my project and highlights the differences between the "pro-choice" and reproductive justice frameworks. In Chapter 2, I outline RJ's theoretical foundations, analyze its historical emergence in reproductive politics, and juxtapose how abortion is represented in dominant cultural discourses vs. emerging RJ counterdiscourses through a comparative analysis of the abortion plotlines in Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Chapter 3 traces the post-*Roe* trends of abortion representations on television, and the last decade's shift towards more counter-hegemonic representations, analyzing abortion plotlines from television shows including *Scandal, Shameless,* and *Black Mirror* through the RJ framework. Finally, through a brief examination of abortion storytelling campaigns in ongoing RJ advocacy efforts, Chapter 4 frames the emergence of RJ counternarratives as a vital component of RJ movement strategies and an urgent intervention into dominant cultural discourses of abortion.

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Dedication

For everyone who has had and will have an abortion: this is for you. Abortion is health care. Abortion is freedom. Abortion access is reproductive justice.

And to my mum and dad, Jane and Tony O'Brien: this thesis is also dedicated to you both, as a testament to my love and gratitude for your ever-enduring love and support. Thank you for risking everything to move our family across the world over a decade ago—I would not be in the position I am today without your strength and sacrifice. I love you so much.

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Reclaiming Abortion Politics through Reproductive Justice: The Radical Potential of Abortion Counternarratives in Theory and Practice

Chapter One: RJT Abortion Counternarratives as Resistance

In 2012, a young pregnant Irish woman, Savita Halappanavar, went to the University Hospital Galway and was told that she was having a miscarriage and was at risk for infection. However, due to Ireland's strict constitutional prohibition against abortion under any circumstances known as the 8th Amendment (passed in 1983), Halappanavar's doctors refused her requests for an abortion, and ultimately did not intervene until it was too late; a subsequent inquiry into her death found that Ireland's 8th Amendment was responsible (Major). For abortion rights organizers in Ireland, Halappanavar's death was a catalyst for their campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment; their plan combined storytelling with other local organizing strategies as a tactic for national, judicial, and parliamentary advocacy for abortion access on human rights grounds. These strategies led the "Together for Yes" Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) to victory; on May 25, 2018, Ireland overwhelmingly voted to repeal the 8th Amendment with two-thirds of voters siding with the Yes campaign, which won 66% of the referendum vote (Griffin and Hoey).

Ireland's historic ARC "Together for Yes" campaign is just one example of abortion rights campaigns around the world using storytelling strategies as a central aspect of their campaign strategy, and also serves as a testament to stories' potential to make a material, lasting impact on our society's attitudes towards abortion. For securing access to safe abortion, any change in laws must coincide with lifting abortion stigma in order to have real potential to make a material impact in shifting the pervasive cultural stigma against abortion. In the context of the Irish campaign, founding ARC member Angela Coraccio explains how lifting anti-abortion stigma was a top priority: "one of our first main objectives was to fight the stigma around abortion, and the culture of shame, and the silencing around women's reproductive lives generally. The best way to end stigma is to start telling personal stories" (as quoted in Thomas, *The Dawn News*).

Ireland's Abortion Rights Campaign used the tragic story of Savita Halappanavar's death as a catalyst for advocating for change and for their campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment. The use of storytelling strategy as a key aspect of the campaign allowed advocates to share personal stories that highlighted a variety of aspects of the significant harmful effects of the 8th Amendment. These stories were shared through ARC abortion speakouts in public spaces as well as in online spaces, and featured a variety of perspectives and experiences on abortion (Thomas). ARC's use of storytelling as a key organizing strategy proved to be effective in changing the cultural narrative around abortion care to disrupt Ireland's dominant cultural discourses around abortion. The ARC campaign shifted the cultural discourse away from a universal image of abortion as always a negative by emphasizing the need for abortion access as a central part of an ethics of compassion and care for pregnant people, or on human rights grounds.

Ireland's recent referendum to repeal the harmful abortion restrictions that the 8th Amendment kept in place represents a global trend of grassroots campaigns using storytelling strategies in combination with local organizing made up of coalitions of cross-movement

organizers working in their particular local, regional contexts. A recent Guttmacher Institute report shows that 27 countries made abortion more accessible from 2000-2017 (Singh et al.), indicating that Ireland's recent victory is also part of a global trend of changing attitudes and legislation around abortion. More specifically, I am interested in the ways in which storytelling, as a central aspect of an organizing campaign strategy, has the potential to change dominant cultural discourses around abortion access that dictate normative cultural understandings of abortion, reflected in anti-abortion laws as well as in the pervasive abortion stigma that underpins their continued enforcement.

In our current political moment, attention to how cultural norms perpetuating abortion stigma are reflected in and further perpetuated by dominant cultural discourses on abortion is more important than ever before. Currently the United States is one of several countries on the path to making abortion completely inaccessible. According to the Guttmacher Institute, "As of 2011, 89% of U.S. counties lacked any abortion provider…the 38% of women of reproductive age living in those counties would have to travel—great distances, for some—to obtain an abortion" (Singh et al. 4-5). This U.S. trend, an increase in state-level anti-abortion legislation, is based on policy-makers' ideological beliefs, beliefs that also structure dominant cultural discourse on abortion that continue to perpetuate the widespread stigma against abortion. This stigma is then further perpetuated by the majority of cultural representations of abortion, which represent dominant cultural discourse and its representation of a universal, singular narrative of the abortion experience.

The Guttmacher Institute's research shows that there is a direct link between abortion stigma and women's access to abortion care,[1] thus arguing that there is an urgent need for the creation and circulation of more counter-hegemonic abortion stories: "Sensitizing the general population and providers to the preventable health risks posed by unsafe abortion is key to reducing cultural and religious objections…designing interventions to reduce stigma has become a priority, as has developing the research tools to measure stigma—from both providers and women's perspectives" (Singh et al. 30). Considering Ireland's successful "Together for Yes" campaign in this way underscores its value as an example of a storytelling-centered intervention from grassroots organizing campaign that successfully and simultaneously lifted abortion stigma and pushed for legal changes that will improve abortion accessibility in Ireland.
Further, this organizing model is an alternative to liberal feminist organizing strategies, which often exist within dominant institutions and rely on dominant, equality, choice-based frameworks of legislative advocacy.

[1] The RJ framework I use throughout this thesis demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom as human rights, and so recognizes that not everyone who gets an abortion is a woman, as does my use of the term "woman." Further, my analysis of counternarratives of abortion recognizes how trans and non-binary people are excluded from abortion discourses, which impacts their access to abortion services. As Loretta Ross explains, "the RJ framework includes transmen, transwomen, and gender non-conforming individuals" ("Teaching Reproductive Justice" 165). I use the term "woman" throughout this thesis, which focuses on dominant representations of abortion that invariable depict abortion through culturally gendered "feminine" norms, due to the context of those representations, and hope to offer counternarratives as ways to broaden understandings of abortions as not universal or a "woman's" experience.

In this thesis, I explain why liberal feminist activist strategies that use pro-choice frameworks are inadequate, not only as activist strategies, but also as a means of the necessary work to be done in shifting cultural attitudes towards abortion. I argue that the ways in which dominant cultural narratives frame abortion as universally bad, or at the very least as what's ideally a choice of last resort (as articulated by many pro-choice advocates) are key to the continual perpetuation of abortion stigma, which contributes to lack of access to abortion. Consequently, those hegemonic narratives are reinforced by how abortion is framed as a black and white issue—or within the pro-choice vs. pro-life binary—a framework which is used by both feminists in support of abortion access and by so-called "pro-life" advocates against it. In other words, both anti-abortion and pro-choice activists construct their arguments within the same normative choice-based framework, one that the same old hegemonic narratives about abortion as a choice rather than a human right. In turn, dominant abortion narratives frame abortion as always a choice, and one that should be a last resort, a framing that flattens the variety of ways in which women experience abortion and erases how the majority of abortion patients do not have access to the necessary resources they need to "choose" abortion at all.

There are many abortion narratives in American culture, including fictional representations in novels, short stories, and television, and non-fictional narratives such as memoirs and online storytelling mediums. However, as all cultural representations are produced in context of social relations of norms, most abortion narratives that circulate in mainstream culture reflect dominant cultural discourses and understandings of abortion—discourses that frame abortion as a universal (and as an always negative) experience. However, the success of the ARC's storytelling campaign in shifting both laws and dominant cultural discourses around abortion points to an important change in both whose abortion stories are told and how they are told and circulated in the form of cultural representations that impact dominant cultural discourses of abortion.

Over the course of this thesis, I examine the emergence of new voices in and new forms of abortion storytelling in context with the radical theory and praxis of reproductive justice (RJ), a theory and movement-building framework that uses storytelling and counternarratives as a means to achieve radical liberation. In 1994, what now constitutes the RJ framework was first articulated by 12 black female activists, many of whom would go on to become part of the black women's collective, Sistersong, the largest national organization currently using the reproductive justice framework. In creating RJ, these black women "created a radical shift from 'choice' to 'justice' to locate women's autonomy and self-determination in international human rights standards and laws, rather than in the constitutionally limited concepts of individual rights and privacy…[which ignore] the institutionalized barriers that constrict individual choices such as racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, ableism, or xenophobia, or more simply, lack of access to appropriate and comprehensive healthcare" (Ross et al. 18-19). Further, RJ advocates have consistently centered storytelling as an organizing strategy to highlight the myriad contexts and experiences of abortion.

In our current political moment, it's more urgent than ever for abortion to be depicted in counter-hegemonic ways, ways that reflect the complexities of identities and experiences of abortion patients in the U.S. Our society's dominant cultural discourses around abortion consistently operate through the rhetoric of choice also used in mainstream reproductive politics,

a rhetorical framework that serves to (inadvertently or not) continually perpetuate abortion stigma in our society. In contrast, the emergence of reproductive justice theory and practice has also facilitated an emergence of more counter-hegemonic abortion stories that help to combat abortion stigma through centering the voices that are more representative of abortion's myriad contexts and experiences. A central claim that I make throughout this thesis is that with the emergence of the reproductive justice framework, there has been a shift not only in reproductive politics, but also in the types of abortion stories that are circulated throughout our culture; the emergence of reproductive justice helped foster the emergence of new, counter-hegemonic abortion stories.

Rather than tracing all U.S. cultural representations that feature abortion, I'm interested in analyzing the ways in which reproductive justice counternarratives are emerging as valuable alternatives to the stories that currently constitute dominant cultural discourses of abortion. Rather than mainstream stories that perpetuate and worsen abortion stigma, these still-emergent reproductive justice narratives challenge dominant, hegemonic abortion stories and create further space for new, alternative stories to emerge. More specifically, I am arguing that the emergence of reproductive justice as a movement strategy shifted reproductive politics. Reading the counter-hegemonic abortion narratives that are emerging as a result of that shift through the reproductive justice theoretical framework reframes these counter-hegemonic stories as vital pieces of the anti-abortion RJ movement strategy, a strategy that has significantly shifted not just whose abortion stories are told, but where and how they are told and circulated throughout society.

Abortion Stigma Reinforced: The Inadequacy of Pro-Choice Politics and Hegemonic Abortion Narratives and The Urgency of RJT

For the purposes of my thesis's analysis of the impact of abortion stories in our culture, the difference between narratives that reflect dominant cultural discourses of abortion and the still-emergent reproductive justice counternarratives is central to my argument. Dominant discourses of abortion represent both the beliefs of the lawmakers in power, as well as the underlying forces of dominant power, the patriarchal and white supremacist discourses that structure normative behavior in society, and that in the case serve to perpetuate the continued stigma around abortion as well as the oversimplification of abortion experiences into one universal narrative. The dominant narrative of abortion in U.S. culture is a negative one.

In her recent study of abortion stigmas in *Happy Abortions,* Erica Millar explains how dominant abortion narratives and representations of abortion in popular culture reinforce the normative cultural script for abortion: "The script depicts abortion as an incredibly difficult choice made in response to extraneous circumstances that are beyond the woman's immediate control; it requires women to justify their abortions preferably by citing the best interests of their potential children, to grieve their lost children after abortion, and to keep their abortions secret out of a sense of shame or guilt" (1). This normative cultural script for abortion is reinforced by cultural representations, which in turn contribute to dominant cultural understandings of abortion--the dominant narrative goes hand-in-hand with dominant ideologies around not just abortion, but broader issues of gender, sexuality, race, class, and other social justice concerns, and thus "representations of abortion are one means by which norms pertaining to gender [in

particular] are naturalized and made to appear outside of culture" (Millar 4). Considering the underlying ideologies structuring dominant discourses of abortion also highlights what is erased by abortion representations that reproduce the abortion experience as a singular, universal narrative.

In contrast, reproductive justice counternarratives have the potential to reverse what is erased in the dominant discourse, thus also to make a valuable contribution to campaigns to reverse abortion stigma. This is not to say that every abortion narrative that does not adhere to the dominant cultural script is counter-hegemonic, or to say that cultural representations are necessarily equivalent to material reality; instead, I am arguing that counter-hegemonic representations of abortion have the real potential to counteract dominant cultural discourses of abortion by offering an alternative to the universal narrative, especially when considered through the RJ framework and utilized as part of a comprehensive strategy to advocate against abortion stigma.

Dominant cultural discourses of abortion reflect mainstream reproductive politics and their underlying frameworks. Since abortion was nationally made legal in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), abortion rights activism has shifted from advocating for abortion access based on the rights to privacy and autonomy towards a "maternal pro-choice" approach that operates using the rhetorical binary set up in the pro-choice/pro-life paradigm used in *Roe v. Wade.* Accordingly, pro-choice activists have contributed to the dominant cultural discourse of abortion as "an incredibly difficult decision that women make in the best interests of their potential children [as this pro-choice framework] allows individuals to rehabilitate abortion to the norm of maternal selflessness for pregnant women" (Millar 204), as well as the norm of femininity that ascribes motherhood as the dominant female role. As Millar argues, when abortion is continuously depicted within a pro-choice framework that "posits motherhood as the only authentic happy choice for pregnant women...abortion emerges as a counterintuitive and unnatural choice for women to make" (Millar 43), a stereotype that constitutes the majority of dominant cultural narratives of abortion circulating in mainstream discourse. These mainstream abortion narratives operate discursively to proscribe cultural understandings of and representations of abortion to a singular story, shaping cultural understandings of abortion as a universal, singular experience.[2]

Another key aspect of their broader negative aspect is how dominant single-story abortion narratives function in and through the stigma embedded within the normative cultural

[2] While it is outside the scope of this thesis to delve into earlier abortion representations in literature and other forms of narrative in popular culture, it is important to at least recognize the contributions of these earlier representations, which allowed us to get to this point today where counter-hegemonic representations are becoming more common in public discourse. Karen Weingarten's analysis is helpful here to contextualize how this used to be far from the case: "By the first few decades of the twentieth century, American authors latched onto abortion as a complicating plot device, and the number of novels, short stories, plays, and poems that openly discuss abortion proliferated" (Weingarten 1). As Weingarten's book *Abortion in the American Imagination* goes on to explain, modernism, as a period in time marked by experimentation, opened up literary space for depictions of abortion that weren't available before; however, as evident from some of the earliest representations of abortion (such as Edith Wharton's *Summer* [1917], Dorothy Parker's "Mr. Durant" [1924], and Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" [1927], among others), abortion is either not directly addressed (as in Hemingway) or depicted as a negative choice of last resort, with the negativity firmly attached to the pregnant female body (as in Wharton and Parker's texts).

script for abortion. Sociologists have defined abortion stigma in the U.S. context, wherein abortion is extremely politicized and has been highly stigmatized since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, as "a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to ideals of womanhood" (Kissling, Loc. 115-121). More specifically, abortion stigma has been understood as occurring at different levels of society presented as "five concentric circles of stigma; with framing and media at the outside, then inner circles of governmental/structural; organizational/institutional, community, and individual" (Kissling, Loc. 132-135). Most importantly for my thesis' purposes, all of these "circles" of abortion stigma are reinforced both discursively and ideologically through dominant cultural representations of abortion; to put it another way, abortion stigma is created and maintained through discursive formations of language and communication.

For example, the first layer of abortion stigma operates through its media framing, which is created and reinforced by the types of cultural representations of abortion circulating in various mediums in popular culture, including mediums such as television and online storytelling that I analyze in the latter chapters of this thesis. These cultural representations "fix the meanings of abortion and the women who have them. It is often presumed that women will experience abortion uniformly, and this is a means by which 'woman' is constructed as a natural, ahistorical subject" (Millar 19). Similarly, the organizational/structural level of stigma operates within reproductive politics, insofar as the majority of organizations frame their advocacy through the "pro-choice" framework, a framework that delimits the types of abortion stories that are told via the discursive binary of pro-choice vs. pro-life that structures mainstream public and cultural discourses of abortion. Considering the "pro-choice" framework in this way highlights why the majority of abortion narratives frame abortion as always a choice, preferably of last resort.

Further, in dominant, hegemonic abortion narratives, "Representations of abortion do not reflect women's experiences, but are in fact powered by norms surrounding gender…[and] other nodes of inequality such as race and social class" (Millar 4-5). In contrast, RJT counternarratives highlight the inadequacy of these dominant narratives and the pro-choice frameworks that bolster them, instead presenting alternative stories that highlight the myriad abortion experiences that occur daily, especially those from the most marginalized communities, such as women of color and low-income women. There can be no real shift to anti-abortion laws without a comprehensive shift in abortion attitudes; the central value in these counter-hegemonic abortion representations is in their potential as a vital first step to lifting harmful abortion stigma that is perpetuated in part by the circulation of cultural representations.

From Pro-Choice to Reproductive Justice: RJ Counternarratives as Resistance

Narratives have long been a tool of feminist organizers, and especially reproductive justice advocates who work with abortion access; with such an intimate event as abortion, speaking to women's experiences is paramount to reaching people and propelling them to movement on the topic. As Kamala Price explains in her article on the possibilities of today's reproductive justice framework, reproductive justice activists have historically used storytelling as "an organizing tool…[and] a pedagogical tool for consciousness-raising within their respective communities" (44).

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this in historical feminist abortion rights advocacy is the Redstockings Abortion Speakout. The Redstockings, a more radical (yet still mostly white) feminist group active in the late 1960 and early 1970s, held an Abortion Speak Out in 1969, where women told their abortion stories to a room full of men and women as a verbal form of textual action, which ultimately contributed to a change in law and policy in the early 1970s (Rhodes 45). This historical example illustrates the ways in which RJT counternarratives, when they circulate throughout mainstream popular culture, are vital in their potential to lift the stigma around abortion.

However, as Millar reminds us, "a politics of abortion fought through first-person narratives runs the risk of further transforming abortion politics into a politics of individual experience" (274), and part of the value of RJT counternarratives is the ways in which they resist this individualization through their circulation and how they encompass such a variety of abortion experiences in the stories they choose to tell.[3] The dangers of individualized abortion storytelling further contributing to sweeping generalizations that universalize the abortion experience[4] are a key indicator of the urgency of the shift in reproductive politics from a pro-choice framework to a reproductive justice framework; a key aspect of the value of the RJ framework is the shift in the types of abortion stories that are heard that accompanies the shift in politics.

For example, Loretta Ross, one of the RJ movement's founders, distinguishes RJ stories as different from the explosion of self-help style confessionals of recent years intentionally, in order to highlight what differentiates RJ counternarratives from any other cultural representation of the abortion experience. Ross critiques mainstream self-help narratives for centering individual responsibility over structural causes of problems, and thus impeding real change: "A commercialized storytelling practice believes that the solutions for today's problems lie in a neoliberal market-based approach to structural problems that ignores corporate practices, endless wars, environmental degradation, gender and racial inequality, and the alienation of individuals as a response to collective oppression" (Ross et al. 22). Ross's critique highlights how mainstream pro-choice politics in turn constitute what becomes part of dominant mainstream abortion narratives, and how pro-choice discourses function to perpetuate normative abortion stigma that blames the oppressed for the conditions of their own oppression, erasing the complicity of those in power on the structural issues and inequities that contribute to individuals'

[3] This differs from the Redstockings Abortion Speakout; while revolutionary and radical for its time, as one of the first mass public events wherein women who had abortions publicly discussed their experiences, the Redstockings' Speakout centered mostly on wealthy to middle-class white women's experiences with abortion (Rhodes 45-50), which (inadvertently as this may have been for the Redstockings) essentially reified the stereotypical, single story of abortion that constitutes dominant, mainstream public discourses.

[4] As Erica Millar reminds us, "Positive abortion narratives certainly exist, and have done since abortion began to be discussed publicly at the turn of 1970s…however, these narratives are usually set up on the defensive, responding to socially-acceptable means of talking about abortion, which emphasize emotions such as grief, regret, guilt, shame and distress, that present abortion as an unfortunate and even harmful experience for women" (3-4).

oppression. In the context of how this stigma operates in abortion stories, these narratives essentially delimit the possibilities for changes in attitudes towards abortion, as well as legal changes to foster more access to abortion.

Further, considering the congruence between the stories told and the reproductive politics at play, Ross's critique points to how RJ's narratives function to counter the single-story and storytelling practices in mainstream culture in favor of stories structured by concepts including intersectionality and polyvocality, which connects storytelling as praxis with RJT's human rights framework. Rather than focusing on individual responsibility, RJT stories focus on how reproductive rights—as human rights—are affirmed or denied, and uses myriad intersectional stories to connect that framework to emotion. As Erica Millar argues, stories such as these are a means for "legal and social recognition of the multiplicity of pregnant subjectivities…[which] involves reconceiving pregnancy as a subjective and variable condition, rather than an objective one" (278-279). Without this recognition, the single-story, individualized narrative of abortion as a universal experience will prevail.

Storytelling as Resistance: What is a Counternarrative?

A key question of this thesis is: What is the urgency of attending to abortion representations, and how do mainstream abortion representations reflect the context of the reproductive politics of their era? To answer this question and before delving further into analyzing the potential of specific examples of counter-hegemonic abortion narratives as forms of resistance, it's important to further contextualize what I mean by abortion stories and/or representations, and how I am differentiating between dominant narratives and counternarratives.

Along with RJT's theory of storytelling as resistance that Chapter Two explains in more detail, I'm also drawing upon Lee Anne Bell's analysis of *Storytelling for Social Justice.* In her book, she lays out four story categories, starting with stock stories (or dominant, normative stories) and also including three different types of stories that she determines resist dominant narratives. Much of my thesis contends with stock stories, to outline the dominant abortion narratives that RJT counternarratives challenge. Bell defines stock stories as "the tales told by the dominant group, passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education and media" (23). Stock stories also mirror the individualized first-person narratives that Ross critiques; these mainstream feminist stories obscure the myriad circumstances that lead to abortions as well as the myriad abortion experiences and narratives that exist—neoliberal mainstream feminist narratives rely on the notion of choice rather than justice. These types of stock stories also reflect what values our culture reifies and bolsters through dominant cultural norms; it's the stock stories that provide a point of departure for counternarratives.

Regarding counternarratives, I find the three types of counternarratives defined by Bell to be extremely helpful, as she delineates certain features of each type of counternarrative to show that there is no one universal counternarrative, which also reflects RJT's focus on polyvocality in storytelling as practice. According to Bell, there are "three types of counter-stories: concealed, resistance and emerging/transforming stories" (15). Bell describes resistance stories as having the ability to lift the veil from dominant narratives and show us what occurs outside the margins

of norms (61), which directly correlates with RJT's vision of storytelling as resistance: "Resistance stories, as a heritage of collective struggle...have the capacity to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy, insert into the public arena and validate the experiences and goals of people who have been marginalized" (Bell 62). Thus, there is a lot of overlap between Bell's ideas and RJT's view of storytelling as resistance, so both theoretical formations will be useful to consider when analyzing dominant abortion narratives and counternarratives.

Storytelling as a Bridge Between Theory and Praxis in RJT

Gloria Anzaldúa's comments on the necessity of writing as action, especially for women of color, are helpful in order to understand storytelling as a form of praxis: "Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared" (Anzaldúa 171). Writing gives women power to tell their stories not only to the public, but also to each other; storytelling bolsters the feminist movement from within, and can also create outwards change on these topics. RJT's emphasis on self-help as storytelling as well as storytelling as praxis reflects Anzaldúa's description of writing as both a mode of survival and a means of gaining power. Both aspects of storytelling, as both self-care and resistance, are crucial to how storytelling functions as praxis specifically within RJT, and as a bridge between theory and activism.

Chapter Trajectories

Over the course of this thesis, I examine storytelling in context with the radical theory and praxis of reproductive justice. As a white feminist committed to dismantling white supremacy, I am particularly invested in illuminating the urgency of RJT as a radical theory of liberation in context with historical and current trends about U.S. cultural approaches and normative responses to reproductive politics. Each of the following chapters examines storytelling in certain contexts—in the forms of cultural representations and as activist praxis—to propose that we read abortion stories through the radical RJT storytelling framework, as part of an RJ strategy for real transformation. I will also examine how abortion stories are coded and understood in popular culture—harmful dominant abortion narratives reify existing normative scripts around the abortion procedure and help reify anti-abortion ideologies.

The rest of my thesis picks up on these themes. Chapter Two lays out a more in-depth explanation of the reproductive justice framework as evidence for one of the central claims I make in this thesis—that the shifts that take place in reproductive politics coincide with the shifts in the types of abortion stories that are told, as well as their circulation in popular culture. It traces the emergence of the reproductive justice framework in reproductive politics, and lays out the theoretical foundations underpinning RJT including black feminist theories (such as standpoint theory), critical race theory, and human rights theory. It also details RJT's storytelling framework, and uses this to build a foundation for the ways I am reading RJT counternarratives of abortion throughout the thesis. The chapter juxtaposes an analysis of Joan Didion's *Play it As It Lays* with an analysis of Alice Walker's *Meridian* to highlight the differences between the pro-choice and reproductive justice frameworks, and how that shift manifested in storytelling about

abortion. Stories have the power to uncover and shift normative discourses; this chapter is the theoretical foundation for the ways in which RJT counternarratives do just that, by centering marginalized perspectives.

Chapter Three highlights another key assertion I make throughout this thesis: in order to even begin to disrupt the dominant cultural discourses of abortion and shift abortion politics in the direction of supporting more access to abortion, more counter-hegemonic representations of abortion need to be circulating in popular culture. I argue that a key part of the radical potential of reproductive justice politics is its corresponding support of the circulation of more radical abortion stories in popular culture. I trace some examples of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic abortion representations on television, in order to highlight how contemporary abortion representations are becoming more counter-hegemonic in both whose abortion stories they tell and how they tell the stories.

Serving as a conclusion, Chapter Four aims to serve as a sort of RJT counternarrative in itself, as to conclude my examination of cultural representations of abortion, I am looking forward--I examine abortion counternarratives to lift stigma as activist strategy, looking at hybrid forms, the use of digital technologies, and how these narratives move from a focus on individual to collective narratives and thus emerge as powerful counternarratives to dominant, hegemonic representations of abortion, which can be used by activists in praxis to resist reproductive oppression.

Chapter Two: The Failure of the Pro-Choice Movement: Moving Towards Revolutionary Politics and Narratives with Reproductive Justice Theory

The concept of reproductive justice was named and created in June 1994 by twelve black women attending a mainstream feminist conference, which was sponsored by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance and the Ms. Foundation for Women (Bond Leonard 39). The mainstream white, middle-class leadership at the conference and in the women's health movement more broadly at this time operated in the same way that the feminist movement has historically, continuing the long legacy of the feminist movement's erasure of the concerns of the most economically disadvantaged and marginalized women. The mainstream feminist movement and their political frameworks constitute the dominant narrative of feminism in popular culture, so also constitute the dominant cultural discourses and understandings of abortion. Uncovering the concealed history of the emergence of the reproductive justice framework's creation and use in the reproductive politics (as a counter-theory for liberation) movement destabilizes that narrative as neutral and normative; instead it explores how dominant cultural discourses that stigmatize abortion have been constructed in tandem with shifts in reproductive politics.

This chapter traces the development of the RJ framework to argue that with the emergence of the reproductive justice framework in reproductive politics came the emergence of new types of abortion representations in mainstream circulation, representations that impacted the broader cultural discourse and understanding of abortion. In this chapter, I lay out the primary frameworks that underpin storytelling as a strategy for changing abortion attitudes reflected in dominant discourse: reproductive justice's theoretical framework for storytelling as a liberatory practice, and RJT's other theoretical frameworks including standpoint theory, black feminist theory, and human rights theory. Alongside these frameworks, this chapter closely analyzes some examples of abortion representations in novels published after *Roe v. Wade* that were counter-hegemonic for their time period. The fictional representations of abortion that this chapter analyzes are examples of "concealed stories…[which] coexist alongside the stock stories [or dominant narratives but are]…hidden from mainstream view" (Bell 23). As Lee Ann Bell further explains, concealed stories are stories from the margins about experiences from the perspectives of the most marginalized, and "narrate the ways that race differentially shapes life experiences and opportunities, disputing the…stock stories [which] control mainstream discourse and naturalize white racial dominance" (43). The following analyses consider fictional abortion stories that center previously marginalized voices and abortion experiences, in order to disrupt dominant discourses that erase the complexities of abortion experiences more broadly.

RJT as a Radical Theory of Liberation: Responsibilities of Anti-Racist, Anti-Imperialist White Feminists Using the RJ Framework

For white feminists to meaningfully engage with RJ as scholars, activists, and organizations, we must risk moving beyond sympathy or intellectual understanding and support anti-oppression organizing, especially in the white community. …Calling on POC to dismantle white supremacy or to help navigate white pain is a manifestation of white privilege and misuses the transformative power of RJ. White supremacy is constructed, maintained, and enforced by white people and white privilege, and we are the people who must deconstruct it as part of our

obligation and specific role in the human rights movement. (Erika Derkas, "Retrofitting Choice: White Feminism and the Politics of Reproductive Justice," 276-277)

To begin my analysis of the emergence of reproductive justice as a theory and movement-building framework and the coinciding emergence of alternative, more counter-hegemonic abortion stories, I include this Derkas quote to emphasize the urgency of reproductive justice as a radical theory of liberation, inextricably connected to dismantling white supremacy. Further, RJT's origins as a movement-building activist strategy are crucial to understanding the overall framework: "even academic systems are not racially or gender neutral, nor objective… Reproductive justice organizes grassroots knowledge into words and experience into theory to counter this false narrative of objectivity and certainty" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 182). RJ frames lack of abortion access as one of many reproductive oppressions that women of color, especially, must face, and places equal weight on the right to abortion, the right to become a parent, and the right to parent in safe and nonviolent communities; this is a drastic departure from mainstream white feminists' exclusive focus on the right to abortion.

I was introduced to the reproductive justice framework as an organizer in the reproductive rights movement, the context in which RJT was first created. In my work in a RJ coalition, those of us belonging to more "mainstream" white feminist organizations operating on choice-based reproductive politics were responsible for teaching our organizations the RJ framework. For example, as part of IRJC I was able to help facilitate a shift in Indiana NOW away from its use of an individualistic, pro-choice strategy to advocate for abortion rights, by helping us interrogate how it was erasing forms of reproductive oppression not related to abortion (so issues not solely focused on the concerns of white-middle-class feminists). I held several workshops with our NOW chapters across the state to teach them not just what the RJ framework says, but also what our unique responsibilities as anti-racist white feminist allies are to the feminists of color in our movement: "White activists and scholars who utilize RJ cannot advocate for human rights, racial justice, and reproductive well-being without holding ourselves and our organizations accountable to marginalized communities (Derkas 275)." NOW is one of the oldest feminist organizations in the country with a long legacy of complicity with white supremacy; as an IRJC member and an anti-racist white feminist ally, it was extremely important for me not just to contend with this legacy as an individual, but to ensure our state organization at large did so as well.

In order to mirror the above attention to white supremacy in my academic work, I focus on attending carefully to how I use reproductive justice theory to undermine white supremacy in the academy; my thesis pays close attention to white mainstream feminists' complicity with white supremacy. Mainstream feminist organizations have a long history of erasing, ignoring and co-opting both women of color's concerns and their contributions to feminist movements. RJ as a strategy was conceived in part as a radical alternative to the pro-choice politics of these organizations, and while RJ is not an essentialist race-based movement (its leaders are made up of folks from all races), white feminists engaging with RJ theory and politics have an extremely important responsibility to not only recognize white organizations' complicity with white supremacy, but also to contest white supremacy within our own organizations. As white RJ activist and scholar Erika Derkas explains in more detail:

> White anti-racist, anti-imperialist feminist allyship is necessary to the RJ movement, as systems of oppression are mutually interdependent…[we must do more than simply recognizing these systems of oppression and] move into active contention. It means being proactively resolute in reversing centuries of genocide and structural violence…resisting false narratives, committing to critical self-examination, and standing with people of color…refuting white privilege and color blindness…[and] making the deconstruction of the uninterrogated power of whiteness within the feminist movement one cornerstone of any genuine challenge to multiple overlapping oppressive systems. (273)

Following Derkas, I am committed to anti-racist and anti-imperialist white feminist allyship, which in my thesis manifests in centering the strategies and narratives of women of color and critiquing mainstream white feminism's historical legacy of reifying the very systems of oppression they claim to be working to dismantle. Regarding the RJ storytelling focus of my thesis, I center the narratives of experiences with myriad, simultaneous reproductive oppressions that the dominant narrative model fails to encapsulate in its limited conception of reproductive rights.

In this chapter, after describing the origins of reproductive justice and the context in which it emerged, I lay out its theoretical foundations and use those foundations to frame my readings of two fictional novels with abortion plotlines: Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* and Alice Walker's *Meridian.* Whereas Didion's protagonist, Maria, and her abortion experience reflect the dominant cultural discourses around abortion (especially for the context in which the novels were published—soon after *Roe v. Wade*), *Meridian* emerges as a counternarrative that is more representative of the complexities of the abortion experience.

From RJ as a Movement-Building Strategy to the Emergence of Reproductive Justice as an Academic Theory

RJT centers the delegitimized historical knowledge that comes from the embodied realities of our most marginalized communities. Consequently, the emergent-RJ counternarratives of abortion experiences center the most marginalized voices and knowledges of the abortion experience. Before analyzing some examples of fictional representations of abortion that counter dominant discourse, it is important to consider that RJT did not develop in formal settings such as academic institutions and organizations. Knowledge from feminists of color has consistently been erased by the whiteness of the mainstream feminist movement, which has reinforced patriarchal hierarchies of knowledge and created a false universal narrative around issues of reproductive politics, thus delimiting feminist organizations' ability to enact lasting, structural change. Instead, RJ theory was/is still being created as a collaborative process through combining the collective knowledge and experiences of women of color feminists—as a counter-theory that re-legitimates previously erased voices and knowledges.

These types of hierarchies of knowledge that erase marginal voices are still very much alive today in many institutions, especially the academy. After the institutionalization of women's studies as a discipline in academia, "feminist thinking that had emerged directly from theory and practice received less attention than theory that was metalinguistic, creating exclusive jargon; it was written solely for an academic audience" (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* 22).

As bell hooks articulates here, while the institutionalization of feminism did foster a sense of legitimacy for feminist thought, it also changed feminist theory's audience. Whereas feminist theory had been tied to feminist movements and politics in practice, academic politics began to overshadow all else, which created a split between feminist theory and the feminist movement, since the knowledge created in academic spheres could only reach a very limited (already privileged) audience. Consequently, the "academization of feminist thought in this manner undermines feminist movement via depoliticization" (hooks, *Feminism* 22), or at the very least it is in danger of doing so, and of deradicalizing feminist thought and in turn feminist movements. hooks' critique of academic feminist theory boils down to the idea that feminism began to be inaccessible to most people, and in a climate where feminist contributions are already co-opted by anti-feminist voices, this only further perpetuates the negative image attached to feminism, as well as the delegitimization of non-normative feminist knowledge. Such delegitimization of the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities serves to bolster white supremacy, through reinscribing historically racist hierarchies of thought and limiting opportunities for imagining otherwise.

Conversely, RJT was created to be "an accessible theory that was both rigorous and powerful [and] that bridged the language of the academy…[to] understand our realities by incorporating diverse theoretical traditions" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 195). As Loretta Ross explains, as a movement-building framework conceived by activists, RJT's epistemological foundation is in stark contrast to that of the majority of academic theoretical frameworks, and so in the academy it has been "dismissively seen as 'folk knowledge' by self-appointed elite traditional theorists who reinforce institutionalized power and privilege…[which highlights how theory] may bind or restrict new knowledge through institutional and intellectual biases and structures" ("Conceptualizing" 194). While mainstream feminist theories largely rely on normative U.S. legal frameworks and dominant histories, RJT serves as a radical counter theory to those frameworks. Lived experiences are a form of embodied knowledge that is too often dismissed in mainstream discourse; rather than reinscribing these hierarchical knowledge frameworks, RJT insists upon the validity of the knowledge and experiences of marginalized communities by centering its ability to be applied in practice, as a tool for achieving real, systemic change. In other words, RJT counters inaccessible academic theories that do nothing to promote change by grounding itself in praxis, affirming the validity of historically delegitimized knowledge, and emphasizing the contextual nature of all knowledge and experience.

RJT also reveals how successful feminist organizing and coalition-building is simply not possible if white feminists do not interrogate our white privilege. For example, as a white woman, it is my responsibility to do the work of deconstructing and dismantling my white privilege, and that of others. Thus, my role in the RJ movement differs from that of women of color; it is not women of color's responsibility to educate white people about the false universalism of whiteness or about the need to deconstruct white supremacy. In order for RJ to achieve its potential as a radical movement for justice and transformation, my role as a white feminist should begin with contesting white supremacy in white mainstream organizations and in my own community.

For example, as mentioned, I began organizing by working with mainstream organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the National Organization for Women (NOW),

simply because they were the most visible pro-choice organizations in my area. My white privilege meant that I knew the "stock story" of these organizations; knowing about their exclusionary practices and racist histories as well, however, I quickly realized that their liberal frameworks of choice and equality did not attend to anything other than the right to have an abortion. Additionally, these organizations were dominated by white middle-class heterosexual cis-gender women who genuinely seemed to believe that they were supporting women of color by inviting them to be involved, albeit primarily as members (not leaders) of the racial justice committee. It wasn't until I met feminists from women-of-color-led organizations and began working primarily with them that I realized why there were so few women of color involved in these mainstream organizations; while all are welcome in theory, in *practice,* there is no real attempt to consider the complexities of myriad experiences with reproductive oppression outside of dominant or normative experiences.

Learning the RJ framework from feminists of color revealed the concealed story, hidden from me due to my white privilege: the complicity of mainstream feminist organizations in upholding white supremacist logics and policies, inadvertently or not. As Erika Derkas argues, when mainstream Western feminist organizations fail to consider contexts and experiences outside of their own then they often "replicate the systems of oppression they claim to contest, silencing marginalized voices…[as a result they, intentionally or not] reinforce racist institutions and practices and ultimately distract from the deep structural forces of oppression" (277). In turn, I realized that by not questioning or working to change its internal structure, I was also complicit in IN NOW's exclusionary practices that adhere to the same logics underlying the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision--a framework centered on the individual and choice. It was only by learning from and following the lead of women of color feminists that I was able to become aware of my complicity in upholding white supremacist norms, and work with them towards creating a statewide reproductive justice coalition that centered the most marginalized voices.

Considering RJT's epistemological framework highlights how RJT counters dominant narratives of reproductive politics. By reinscribing hierarchies of knowledge production that serve to bolster existing power structures, dominant narratives and the mainstream feminist organizations that utilize them are complicit in reinscribing white supremacy, and part of a historical legacy of white feminists "using nonwhite feminist frameworks and languages to replicate oppressive behaviors" (McFadden 243). In the next section of this chapter, I analyze an example of a dominant abortion narrative that operates through the "choice" rhetorical framework; Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays*, in order to illustrate how mainstream white feminisms and their narratives reify white supremacy by reinforcing it as the norm, insofar as white women's experiences are framed as standard, universal, and/or normative.

Rereading Joan Didion's Play it as it Lays *Through RJT*: *White Supremacy and the Failures of Hegemonic Abortion Narratives*

In Joan Didion's *Play it As it Lays,* the plot hinges on Maria, the protagonist, and her abortion. However, as in the majority of mainstream abortion representations in fiction before *Roe v. Wade,* abortion in the novel operates primarily as a plot device—a stand in for Maria's mental breakdown. It also operates discursively to reify the dominant cultural discourse of abortion that frame the ways in which abortions are represented as one universal, singular

experience associated with white, middle-class experiences. The fact that Maria's abortion was not really her decision is important here—it was essentially a decision made for her by her husband, Carter, after she becomes pregnant and is unsure who the father is. Carter threatens to take their daughter, Kate, away from her if Maria does not undergo the abortion. This type of conflict—wherein the abortion is the only solution to the main issue of not wanting to become a parent—is illustrative of dominant mainstream abortion representations prior to *Roe* as well as the types of abortion experiences that constitute dominant abortion discourses still today: the notion of abortion as a choice that causes great turmoil for the woman in question, and those around her.

The climax of Didion's *Play it as it Lays* hinges on Maria's abortion, which is illegal (as the novel is published prior to *Roe v. Wade*) and an all-around terrible experience that marks the first major turning point in Maria's downward spiral into depression. Further, the way the abortion is depicted insinuates that it is the cause of Maria's woes. This passage of dialogue from Maria's abortion provider is illustrative of how dangerous her abortion was, prior to *Roe*:

> No moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself…"Hear that scraping, Maria?" the doctor said. "That should be the sound of music to you . . . don't scream, Maria, there are people next door, almost done, almost over, better to get it all now than do it again a month from now ... I said don't make any noise, Maria, now I'll tell you what's going to happen, you'll bleed a day or so, not heavily, just spotting, and then a month, six weeks from now you'll have a normal period, not this month, this month you just had it, it's in that pail." (Didion 81-82)

As this passage indicates, this depiction of abortion hinged mostly on two things: one, it's used as a plot device to resolve the arc of Maria's character, and two, it shows how dangerous illegal abortion was and provides a representation of how abortion impacted this individual character's life in a negative way (because of it being illegal). Further, this representation of abortion resonates with maternal pro-choice rhetorics that depict abortion as a difficult choice, a choice of last resort (which also underlies dominant cultural representations of abortion prior to *Roe*, and is still evident in current mainstream abortion discourses). Thus Didion's *Play it As It Lays* not only exemplifies the features of many mainstream abortion representations that reify abortion stigma, but also, and more importantly, it emerges as a vital example of the need for counternarratives in how abortion is represented in cultural artifacts (such as novels) and discourses. For that reason, this chapter now turns to tracing the RJT storytelling theory, as well as RJT's other theoretical foundations, as frames to help understand the political potential of counter-hegemonic fictional abortion representations in the post-Roe era.

RJT Foundations as a Frame for Counter-Hegemonic Abortion Stories

RJT's Storytelling Theory

RJT centers storytelling as one of its foundations: "Storytelling is a crucial part of reproductive justice theory, an act of reclamation and resistance, because our theories grow from our activist locations" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 203). Beginning with activists centering their

lived experiences as the impetus for their work, RJT continually centers stories as an impetus for change in praxis, following the legacy of the many feminists of color who have done so throughout the past few decades. RJT also emphasizes the importance of shifting our perspectives through these various stories: "No single lens can work for all. To embrace the vision of reproductive justice, one must embrace polyvocality—many voices telling their stories that together may be woven into a unified movement for human rights" (Ross and Solinger 59). Storytelling that centers the importance of polyvocality and positions itself as an act of reclamation and resistance is key to RJT.

As a foundational part of RJT's framework, storytelling also serves as the bridge between RJT as theory and as activism. As Loretta Ross explains, RJT combines both reason and emotion as a testament to its combination of theory and praxis, with "liberatory consciousness" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 205) through storytelling as their bridge. Ross defines RJ as "an emancipatory projection of our ideals and the dialectics between consciousness, oppression, and activism… theory is directly applied to activism to transform not only the thinking but also the strategies and practices of activism" ("Conceptualizing" 205). In this way, Ross positions RJT as a theory and praxis for liberation from oppression, with RJ stories as vehicles for both, as theory and praxis cannot be separated: "RJ offers everyone a way to claim ownership of their lives and stories through first-person narratives and storytelling as a vehicle for social and personal transformation…Stories help us claim our dignity and respect to tell the truth of our lives" (Ross et al. 22)…and "these essays [in the collection, such as those focusing on incarcerated childbirth, and reproductive justice for folks with HIV/AIDS] offer lenses for those marginalized by society to find their voices and rightfully demand inclusion in the RJ movement" (Ross et al. 23).

A key foundation of this emphasis on stories as bridges between the various components of RJT comes from the National Black Women's Health Project's "storytelling-based, peer-support process introduced as a black feminist practice…in 1983" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 204). RJT has incorporated self-help as a black feminist practice, and as a form of structured storytelling. Ross claims this "affirms our experiences as women of color and supports us as we become more aware of the oppressive systems we face within the broader social/political/ economic context that is our reality" and cites the practice as crucial to RJ's success: "Absent a process of self-help or a similar liberatory practice…strategic efforts to bring people together while respecting differences and commonalities may be virtually impossible to sustain" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 208). Considering stories as potential resistance, Ross articulates storytelling as key to the potential of reproductive justice, through first-person stories as transformative both personally and culturally.

RJT Theoretical Foundations: Black Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Human Rights

As founding RJ mother Ross asserts, "Reproductive justice theory is the logical next step in the tradition of black women's intellectual history, to bring the work of black feminists into focus when we assert out leadership in reproductive politics" ("Conceptualizing" 184). This section of this chapter will trace some of the foundations of RJT: black feminism; intersectionality (as conceived by critical race and feminist legal theory); and human rights theory. This section constitutes the framework for how I will reread Walker's *Meridian* and other

later analyses of counter-hegemonic abortion representations that serve as examples of RJT abortion counternarratives.

RJT first cites black feminist theories as a foundational theoretical influence. Black feminists use their lived experiences to theorize how oppressions are based on historical, material contexts based on intersectional experiences with oppression. RJT uses black feminist theories as a basis for centering the voices of the marginalized, as for decades, black feminists have been doing work intended to communicate, and not for self-preservation: "Black feminists write about the intimate connection between the production of knowledge and the power relations of our society" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 183). Following in this tradition, RJT rejects opaque, obscure jargon used in high theory and instead aims to "both use feminist theoretical language and make it accessible" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 183), in large part through centering the voices and experiences of the most marginalized communities.

Considering the potential of counternarratives to disrupt dominant discourses more broadly, I am also largely influenced by standpoint theory as it was articulated as a central aspect of black feminisms. For folks from marginalized communities, stories bear witness to their struggle and survival in the face of a system of norms that silences their voices and marginalizes their experiences. In *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins highlights how the historical experiences of marginalized groups are shaped and culturally understood by location in relation to power. Hill Collins' use of standpoint theory also points to what we miss when marginalized voices and stories are silenced, and how all of us understand culture and its stories from our specific locations as defined by our various identities and ways of being and knowing in the world. Again, this goes back to a central focus of this thesis; how stories provide us with some of the most powerful context to learn about and understand our culture, and how it determines norms based on gender, race, class, and other factors. As Lee Ann Bell argues, "stories operate on both individual and collective levels…[they] help us connect individual experiences with systemic analysis, allowing us to unpack in ways that are perhaps more accessible than abstract analysis alone, racism's hold on us as we move through the institutions and cultural practices that sustain racism… [and] offer an accessible vehicle for uncovering normative patterns and historical relations that perpetuate racial privilege" (16).

Perhaps the most influential to my thinking on intersectionality in a slightly different context is radical black feminist theorist bell hooks, whose re-writing of feminist theory in her text, *Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center* (1984), coins the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (xiv), and uses it throughout to consider both the various ways in which women are oppressed and, especially important for my purposes, how the white essentialist mainstream branch of the feminist movement has consistently used racist rhetoric and exclusionary strategies to diminish the presence and interests of black feminists in the movement. Further, hooks' theory is crucial to RJT as resisting white supremacy is one of its fundamental tenets As Ross explains, "white supremacy is an ideology used to promote unequal laws, practices, and social outcomes, such as differential, racially structured access to power" ("Conceptualizing" 173), and contesting white supremacy is something that pro-choice feminisms often fail at doing. This is an inherent part of RJT as a theory and praxis, and one that comes from theories of intersectionality from critical race scholars and black feminists.

Along those lines, hooks spends considerable time in her text discussing the intersections between race and gender in feminism, and claims that "Feminist theory would have much to offer if it showed women ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected rather than pitting one struggle against the other or blatantly dismissing racism" (hooks 64). In today's intersectional reproductive justice framework, the connection between race, class, and gender is paramount to the success of and actions related to the movement, and hooks was one of the theorists who directly inspired that framework. Further, hooks can be seen as a radical for her rejection of dominant culture, as in this intersectional call to action: "To develop political solidarity among women, feminist activists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture. We must set our own terms" (hooks 47), echoing Crenshaw's claim that bringing black feminists into the structure of the existing mainstream movement is not enough, and that the only way to fix racism is to overhaul the system entirely. hooks sums up why intersectionality is so important here:

> Every woman can stand in political opposition to sexist, racist, heterosexist, and classist oppression. While she may choose to focus her work on a given political issue or a particular cause, if she is firmly opposed to all forms of group oppression, this broad perspective will be manifest in all her work irrespective of its particularity…Women must learn to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals. (hooks 62-63)

This type of call for intersectional feminism centered on coalition across difference, and this theme resonated with texts written by other feminists of color during this time period as well as later on, with the texts that defined the RJ framework. For example, Audre Lorde's landmark essay on the central tenets and urgency of intersectionality, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," which she first delivered as a conference paper in 1980, echoes some of the same themes that hooks discusses, especially the need for coalition across difference. Lorde critiques how society actively seeks to divide us to prevent coalitions across difference, by arguing that:

> Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy…we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing…Certainly, there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (115).

Lorde's call for coalition across difference centers the same intersectional tenets that underlie today's RJT's framework, which rests on these types of intersectional analyses of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc., and on RJT's relevance across identity categories. Black feminist theorizations of intersectionality articulate that we all encounter reproductive oppression in different ways, and RJT takes that theorization and builds upon it to even emphasize the need to build coalition across difference to create pathways for radical change. And most importantly, RJ centers the experiences of the most marginalized to contest white supremacy and the devaluation of women of color.

Citing critical race and critical feminist theories as another key part of the theoretical roots of reproductive justice, Ross claims that they "explain the social customs, laws, and legal practices that disadvantage nonwhite and nonmale people in society while providing the framework for understanding intersectionality" ("Conceptualizing" 197). Accordingly, one of RJT's foundations comes from critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989, in her black feminist critique of the consistent exclusion of black feminists and their concerns from mainstream feminist organizations. Crenshaw posits intersectionality theory as the solution to feminism's exclusionary tradition, and as having three main spheres of influence—structural, political, and representational, which mirrors reproductive justice's focus on how intersecting oppressions are integrative. While these intersecting oppressions may affect each individual and community differently, reproductive justice uses the concept of intersectionality to move away from single-issue movements: "It provides an avenue for cross-issue alliances to achieve systematic, institutional changes because systems of oppression overlap and interact with each other…Solutions based on an intersectional analysis requires a holistic approach, not a linear approach" (Ross and Solinger 75). Since it's based on a human rights framework that's applicable to all human beings, regardless of income, race, ability, sexuality or gender, reproductive justice is uniquely equipped for analyses of intersecting oppressions without privileging one form of oppression over another. For RJT, "Intersectionality is the process; human rights are the goal" (Ross, "Conceptualizing" 174).

Crenshaw also contends that simply bringing black feminists into mainstream feminism is not sufficient, and that any analysis that does not consider intersectionality is not useful in praxis: "for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or the 'Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast" (140). Crenshaw posits intersectionality theory as the solution to feminism's exclusionary tradition, and also alludes to the importance of storytelling as praxis here with her focus on translating women's experiences into policies; and RJT takes up Crenshaw's call to "rethink and recast" feminist frameworks by rejecting the individualistic choice paradigm for a theory based on a call for justice through centering the stories of the most marginalized women's experiences. In an excellent response to the most common misconceptions around intersectionality as simply a marker of difference, Ross argues that intersectional analyses should coincide with analyses of power relations: "Intersectionality should not be reduced to simplistic markers of difference (which everyone has) but instead focus on the ideologies and mechanics of oppression (which everyone doesn't experience)" ("Teaching Reproductive Justice" 171). These power relations impact who gets to tell their story and whose voices are heard, and so further explains RJT's storytelling emphasis. Centering marginalized voices and experiences is paramount to RJT's goal of reproductive justice for all women, and storytelling using intersectional frameworks creates the space for those stories to emerge.

The final key underlying theoretical framework I will focus on here is human rights theory. RJT is rooted in an international framework of human rights rather than the U.S. context of choice and privacy, which reduces abortion politics to the reductive pro-choice vs. pro-life story and places it firmly within the current U.S. legal vs. criminal binary framework. As Ross reminds us, RJT is based in the understanding that individual autonomy is a human right so it is "the obligation of government and society to ensure that the conditions are suitable for

implementing one's decisions. Individual and state actions are interdependent to achieve reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy" ("Conceptualizing" 174). Thus, individual autonomy must go hand in hand with government actions for the human rights of the collective—they are interdependent, and this is something that the above passage acknowledges and that RJT emphasizes as the way to achieve justice in practice.

The key difference between RJT and pro-choice frameworks continues to be RJT's holistic focus, as Ross explains: "Reproductive justice centers on three interconnected values based on human rights: the right *not* to have children…to *have* children under the conditions we choose…[and] the right to *parent* the children we have in safe and healthy environments" ("Conceptualizing" 171). Again, this highlights how reproductive justice is based on the human rights to autonomy and freedom, and how this part of RJT is directly related to how the most marginalized women among us contend with the most reproductive oppression.

Together, all of these theoretical foundations define reproductive justice as a theory and practice. To show the value of rereading abortion representations through RJT in order to uncover the liberatory potential of counter-hegemonic abortion representations, this chapter ends with an analysis of Alice Walker's *Meridian* as an example of an earlier RJT counternarrative.

Rereading Alice Walker's *Meridian* as an RJT Counternarrative

In "The Conquering Prince" chapter of *Meridian*, Alice Walker's depiction of Meridian's abortion experience reflects the complexities of her reproductive experiences as a young black woman. Meridian gets an abortion without Truman knowing, and she mentions seeing him in his "father's new red car" with another girl while she is on her way to get the abortion procedure (Walker, Loc. 1519-1527). Walker connects Meridian's abortion with the ways in which her sexuality is defined by the men around her, like Truman, as countering her own definition of her selfhood. The language Walker uses to describe Meridian's abortion experience is particularly striking:

> Later, as the doctor tore into her body without giving her anesthesia (and while he lectured her on her morals) and she saw stars because of the pain, she was still seeing them laughing, carefree, together. It was not that she wanted him any more, she did not. It enraged her that she could be made to endure such pain, and that he was oblivious to it. (Loc. 1519-1527)

The connection Walker makes to Meridian's frustration with the gendered double standard associated with the stigma of abortion alongside an additional focus on the racialized aspects of Meridian's particular experience (insofar as she was still receiving terrible abortion-care after *Roe*, probably because a white doctor chose not to treat her, and/or she did not have the financial resources necessary to access abortion) speaks to *Meridian*'s potential as an RJ counternarrative to dominant abortion discourses. Rather than the universal, singular narrative on display in Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays,* Walker's *Meridian* represents abortion in a much more in-depth way that gets at some of the difficulties in obtaining an abortion from Meridian's particular experience as a young black woman in the south in the 80s.

Meridian explores the ways in which stereotypes of women of color as sexually deviant criminalizes their pregnancies and makes accessing abortion particularly precarious. As RJT activist Andrea Smith argues, the pro-life camp's support of criminalizing abortion contradicts their official platform as protectors of 'life' and exposes how this hypocrisy bolsters state-sponsored white supremacy, with the prison-industrial complex functioning as one such state-sponsored institution: "In the name of promoting life, the pro-life movement supports one of the biggest institutions of violence and death in this society [aka the criminal justice system]...Given the disproportionate impact of criminalization on communities of color, support for criminalization as public policy also implicitly supports racism" (157). Pro-choice activists working within the pro-choice/pro-life dichotomy also, inadvertently or not, often support such practices of state-sponsored racism. By not questioning criminalization as the appropriate response to issues of reproductive healthcare, pro-choice activists are working within the same frameworks as those in the pro-life camp.

In turn, the dominant cultural discourses on abortion represent these ideologies' overwhelming impact on women of color; it's women of color and low-income women who are the most affected and whose pregnancies continue to be criminalized.[5] This is reflected in the way the doctor talks to Meridian. He tells her: "'I could tie your tubes,' he chopped out angrily, 'if you'll let me in on some of all this extracurricular activity'" (Walker, Loc. 1527-1532). As mentioned, the doctor also does the abortion procedure while further lecturing Meridian on her immorality in getting pregnant, and performs it without anesthesia. This dehumanization and criminalization of women of color's pregnancies continues today, and has an impact on maternal pro-choice rhetorics that advocate for abortion as a choice of last resort. That framework underlies dominant abortion frameworks, thus *Meridian's* representation of a more complex experience of abortion underwritten with intersecting disadvantages based on Meridian's race, class, and gender is discernible as a clear counter to the culturally pervasive hegemonic abortion narrative.

As RJT scholar Caroline McFadden explains, "RJT inspires us to blast open the hegemonic discourse of reproductive rights and excavate white supremacy's role in reproductive injustices" (247), primarily through the production and circulation of RJT counternarratives,

[5] For example, Angela Davis articulates the racism within what she calls the "lily-white" (203) second-wave movement by noting how black feminists and other feminists of color were absent from mainstream abortion rights campaigns, and that the history of abuse (sterilization programs, lack of access to birth control, etc.) toward women of color was ignored, despite its pervasiveness (203). Considering the state's historic use of institutions to prohibit certain populations from becoming mothers, a history that has often been ignored by white feminist organizations, women of color activists emphasize that a major part of reproductive justice rests on the idea that, "the right to have a child was as crucial to women's dignity and safety (and the dignity and safety of her community) as the right to prevent conception" (Ross and Solinger 55). This is especially relevant when considering how marginalized populations are the ones who suffer most from reproductive oppression, yet also have the least access to the resources they need to make these choices; the choice framework promotes the same structures of oppression that reproductive rights organizations claim to aim to dismantle.

which attend to the contextual, historic complexity of reproductive oppression in order to emphasize structural rather than individual causes and solutions. Another way that *Meridian* disrupts dominant abortion discourses and emerges as an RJT counternarrative is the ways in which Walker connects Meridian's abortion to her experiences with multiple intersecting forces of oppression. Walker first makes this connection with one of Meridian's initial comments after her abortion: "It seemed doubly unfair that after all her sexual 'experience' and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex" (Loc. 1525-1527). Here, Walker points to Meridian's recognition of the double layered oppression she has had to contend with throughout her abortion experience—oppression based on her identity as a young black woman and reinforced by mainstream cultural discourses that proscribe ideal femininity as equivalent to whiteness. Accordingly, one of the powerful underlying themes throughout *Meridian* is the tension Meridian's character feels between her right to choose not to parent and her right to parent.

These themes are evident from the primary source of Meridian's distress about her abortion—Truman, the young black man who would have fathered her baby. She comments on his sexual encounters with exchange students with disdain, but it is her commentary when Truman approaches Meridian again, after her abortion, that is the most compelling. He tells her she is beautiful, and the language Walker uses here is illustrative of the importance underlying the scene: '"You know,' he said, squinting up his eyes as if seeing something clearly with immense strain. 'I don't know what was wrong with me. You're obviously a stone fox…You're beautiful…Have my beautiful black babies" (Walker, Loc. 1545-1548). After this, Meridian begins hitting him across the face until "Blood dropped onto his shirt" (Walker, Loc. 1547-1548). Meridian is angry because of how he treats her, as a young black woman, as opposed to how he treats young white women; he seems to view Meridian and her sexual body as disposable or not worthy of respect, which is evident from his failure to use protection during his sexual encounter with Meridian and his failure to notice her pregnancy. When we consider these aspects of Truman's character in light of Meridian's journey of constant struggle as a voting rights activist who continues to deal with highly dramatized pain as a result of her abortion throughout the novel, as well as the adoption plotline, *Meridian* emerges as a counter-hegemonic counternarrative to the singular, white abortion representation exhibited in my analysis of Didion's *Play it as it Lays.*

The adoption plotline is worthy of attention for how it complicates the abortion plotline and highlights the complexities of Meridian's experience as a young black woman. Before she gets her abortion, the novel details Meridian's first pregnancy, in high school, which she chose to resolve with an adoption: "When she gave him away she did so with a light heart. She did not look back, believing she had saved a small person's life. But she had not anticipated the nightmares that began to trouble her sleep….She felt deeply that what she'd done was the only thing, and was right, but that did not seem to matter. On some deeper level than she had anticipated or had even been aware of, she felt condemned, consigned to penitence, for life" (Walker, Loc. 1152-1157). Meridian's mixed feelings about her adoption, despite her certainty about her decision, reflect the complex history of black maternity, and the myriad institutions and laws that have criminalized women of color's pregnancies as well as women of color's inability to conform to normative gendered norms of femininity associated with whiteness.

The post-*Roe* era still operated in the same political context as pre-*Roe,* insofar as its dominant discourses reflected racialized biases. While privileged white women were being prohibited from ending their pregnancies, low-income women-of-color were forcibly sterilized against their will, or became victims of other eugenic policies designed to prohibit what the state considered to be "undesirable" reproduction of non-white populations. As Ross explains, this use of negative eugenics against women of color's right to become pregnant is a key reason why a major tenet of RJT is the right to parent, and why this right to parent goes hand-in-hand with the right to not become a parent: "By also claiming genetic differences among races of people, eugenicists reinforced the justification for white supremacy as a politicized and publicized project…vulnerable people were targeted because of their race, mental and physical disabilities, economic status, ethnicity, immigration status, education level, religion, or age…eugenics was a race- and a class-based ideology of population control" (Ross, "Trust Black Women" 65).

This is the context in which Meridian makes her abortion decision, and it underlies her feelings about both her adoption and abortion: "Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children…And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away" (Walker, Loc. 1160-1162). She goes on to describe herself as "unworthy" of belonging to black women's maternal history, "as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member" (Walker, Loc. 1163-1164). This reflects how stigmatized abortion was during this time in black communities, despite *Roe*; *Roe* could not erase the histories of reproductive oppression more often than not associated with removing black women's right to become parents rather than to not become parents. Again, this reflects a key aspect of RJT—the right to become a parent—that is a key aspect of the framework and a key factor in what differentiates RJT from the pro-choice framework.

Instead of only advocating for the right to abortion, one of the key potentials of the reproductive justice framework is its focus on the historical legacy of eugenic population control policies. Historically, women of color have been denied the right to parent as well as the right to choose not to parent—consequently, reproductive justice theory puts abortion rights in context with the right to be a parent (or not) and to parent in safe and healthy communities. In this context, *Meridian* emerges as a powerful RJT abortion counternarrative that exposes how the singular story of a middle-class white abortion experience flattens the complexity of the procedure, as well as the myriad intersecting forces of oppression that impact patients and their ability to access abortion care.

Reading *Meridian* and other counter-hegemonic abortion stories through the frameworks of reproductive justice and storytelling illustrates the ways that they counter dominant cultural discourses and understandings of abortion—essentially, I read RJT's theoretical foundations as frames for understanding the political potential of these fictional counter-hegemonic abortion representations, a theme picked up on in my next chapter in relation to how abortion is represented in counter-hegemonic ways on television.

Chapter Three: The Transformative Potential of Abortion Storytelling in Popular Culture: Counter-Hegemonic Abortion Representations in Contemporary Television

The first primetime show to include a plotline where the lead character has an abortion was CBS's sitcom *Maude*, wherein Maude Findlay found herself unexpectedly pregnant over the age of forty. Maude's character is representative of the woman featured in the universal abortion narrative—an educated, middle-class woman; in the context of 1972, when the show's episode aired, Maude had the additional privilege of living in New York City, wherein abortion was legal for months before *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 (Williams). Thus it's no surprise that the conversations that take place on the show about abortion are about uncovering the existence of the procedure, as well as commentary on how now it is safe whereas before it was not. For example, Maude's daughter, Carol, tells her in the episode: "We're free. We finally have the right to decide what we can do with our own bodies…It's a simple operation now…When you were young, abortion was a dirty word. It's not anymore" ("Maude's Dilemma: Part One"). This heavy focus on affirming the morality of women obtaining abortions makes sense when we consider the ways in which the episode heavily privileged Maude's decision-making, almost in a heavy-handed way, insofar as it was the focus of the entirety of the plot.

After *Roe v. Wade,* the first legal abortion aired on daytime television in an *All of My Children* episode, wherein the character Erica Kane decided to have an abortion. Erica had just begun her modeling career and decided to secretly terminate her pregnancy. When her husband later found out what she had done, he was furious, and their marriage ultimately failed. Despite Erica's reason for getting an abortion being fairly progressive for the time period, the ways she was represented as coming to her decision were hegemonic; Erica is represented as having mentally blocked out the abortion in order to deal with it, even initially saying (and perhaps believing) that she had miscarried (Williams).[6] This representation emphasizes her feelings of shame and uncertainty about the procedure, like most hegemonic abortion representations that constituted the basis for dominant cultural discourses of the time.

The plotlines of the first primetime and daytime television abortion reflects the reproductive politics of the era; abortion was just beginning to be legal and becoming somewhat acceptable in mainstream cultural discourse, and the pro-choice framework was on the verge of becoming the dominant political framework. The *Maude* episode in particular is an example of the central focus of this chapter: the shifts in the political landscape of the reproductive rights movement are also relevant to the shifts in the types of abortion stories that circulated in public discourse (thus constituting the dominant cultural discourse about abortion in each time period). As the political landscape of the reproductive rights movement shifted towards the binary pro-life vs. pro-choice politics, wherein abortion advocates were always on the defensive and

[6] The head writers later rewrote the story in 2005, when it was revealed that a character in the show, Dr. Greg McFadden, had transplanted the aborted fetus into his infertile wife—the child is later revealed to be another character (Williams). Not only is this storyline ridiculous, it is incredibly scientifically inaccurate, thus just another example of how many abortion plotlines on television misrepresent the majority of patients' abortion experiences by oversimplifying them, or in this case, by vastly over-exaggerating and potentially typifying an experience as universal that has no basis in scientific reality.

abortion is always cast as an inherently negative choice, the types of abortion stories told in popular culture and the ways they were received also reflected that shift.

The ways that public reception of the *Maude* episode shifted after *Roe v. Wade* are also helpful to highlight how shifts in reproductive politics correlated with shifts in the circulation and reception of abortion stories. While it created a bit of a controversy when it first aired in the fall of 1972, with some CBS affiliates choosing not to air the two-part special, when CBS aired a rerun the following summer—after *Roe v. Wade*–the backlash to the abortion plotline was significantly more intense. Approximately 40 affiliates refused to air the rerun, no corporate sponsors opted to purchase advertising space for the rerun, and CBS received close to 24,000 letters of protest after it aired (Williams). The intense backlash *Maude's* abortion plotline received when it aired post-*Roe v. Wade* reflected the rising strength of the conservative right and the anti-abortion movement, which also marked a shift in mainstream public discourse and cultural representations of abortion. After the *All of My Children* episode in 1973, abortions did not appear on mainstream television again until the 80s; this is no coincidence, as the 70s marked the rise of the strength of the pro-life movement and thus the decline in counter-hegemonic abortion stories.[7]

As reproductive justice rises in its uptake in both the academy and reproductive politics, more counter-hegemonic representative of abortion that attend to the myriad contexts of abortion in the U.S. are beginning to appear, especially on television. In the last five years especially, numerous popular television shows have included abortion plot lines that disrupt the normative dominant narrative: some stories disrupt the stigma of abortion as a negative experience no matter what, such as *Grey's Anatomy's* Cristina, who has an abortion with relief, and *Scandal*'s Olivia, whose abortion is fast, simple and easy, not fraught with tragedy and peril. Other recent abortion stories highlight abortion experiences that the universal dominant narrative erases. For example, *Shameless* depicts the struggles Fiona has accessing abortion due to her lack of access to financial resources; *Jane the Virgin* depicts the first Latinx character to have an abortion; and *Dear White People* centers the abortion experience of a black woman. These counternarratives are valuable for the ways they focus the experiences of marginalized patients and stories, and disrupt the status quo, or the stock story of the universal abortion experience.

Along with tracing some examples of hegemonic television abortion plotlines, this chapter analyzes some of the aforementioned television shows' abortion plot lines as representative examples of abortion representations on television since *Roe v. Wade,* attending to the nuances in the ways that abortion is represented and how these nuances reflect the political landscape. After briefly analyzing *Black Mirror's* "Arkangel" as a representative of the dangers of hegemonic abortion representations on television, I analyze some counter-hegemonic abortion representations on television from the last decade to illustrate the ways that shifts in reproductive

[7] As Sisson and Kimport's 2014 study highlights, representations of pregnancy decisions on television post-Roe resulted in fewer abortions (55.1% from 1973 through February 2013) than representations of pregnancy decisions on television before Roe (from 1913-1972, 64.7% of pregnancies depicted on television resulted in abortions) (416). This supports my claim that the shift in reproductive politics after Roe towards a more defensive reactive strategy (as a result of the rise in the anti-abortion movement after *Roe*, ushered in with the passing of the Hyde Amendment) is also reflected in the shift to fewer abortion representations on television overall during this time period.

politics also contribute to shifts in the types of abortion stories told in popular culture, and the ways in which they are told. More specifically, I frame the abortion plotlines in *Scandal* and *Shameless* as RJT counternarratives; these counter-hegemonic abortion representations attend to the diverse abortion experiences of myriad marginalized groups in order to disrupt the dominant narrative of abortion as always a negative "choice," and perhaps even shift the public debate on abortion.

The Dangers of Hegemonic Representations of Abortion on Television in Context

In the past few decades, abortion representations on television shows in particular have risen significantly, yet not all of them can be considered to be counter-hegemonic representations of abortion. Historically, the majority of mainstream abortion plotlines on television and other forms of media in popular culture vastly misrepresent the myriad array of identities and experiences of abortion patients that exist in our society. Additionally, the reception of stories depends on context of one's individual positionality and where one is positioned in the matrix of society's power relations: "in a deeply racialized society stained by structural racism, not all stories are equally acknowledged, affirmed or valued. Vigilance about the danger of story to support an individualistic relativism that elides differences in power and privilege is crucial" (Bell 18). In other words, some abortion stories are heard more than others, and no story can create change on its own. More specifically, a recent study on abortion representations on television indicates that the content of the abortion plotlines change based on the year in which they air, which suggests an interactive relationship between these fictional representations and cultural attitudes towards abortion in reality. This is most apparent from their finding of a 105% increase in abortion plotlines from 2003 to 2012 (Sisson and Kimport, 415). This correlates with the resurgence of anti-abortion politics in this time period, showing that fictional representations of abortion affect actual attitudes towards it in society.

All cultural representations exist in relation to the political, economic and social contexts of their time, and inserting anti-abortion rhetoric and ideologies into popular culture is far from a new strategy. In a recent study of how abortion is depicted on television, Sisson and Rowland argue that since abortion is the most stigmatized procedure in reproductive healthcare, the way it is represented in popular culture and media is even more influential than other reproductive healthcare procedures. Their study found 80 television show episodes from 2005-2016 wherein a character had an abortion. Of those episodes, "30 plot lines (37.5%) included at least one complication, intervention or negative health consequence…[a] notable contrast to the 2.1% of real abortion patients who experience complications or require intervention" (Sisson and Rowland 26). These findings illustrate how abortion is typically portrayed in popular culture--as a dangerous, uncommon procedure.

Another recent study of representations of abortion on television found that there was "an unexpectedly high prevalence of death in storylines about abortion…The 9% (n=16) rate of death directly caused by abortion in the fictional stories is inaccurately exaggerated; current risk estimates place risk of death from abortion as statistically zero" (Sisson and Kimport 417). Overall, "Abortion is consistently depicted as more dangerous that it truly is, and characters who obtain abortions differ from real women getting abortions both demographically and in their reasons for doing so" (Sisson and Kimport 161). It is almost impossible to make abortion more

accessible when it's this stigmatized, fictional or not, these stories reflect and foster public discourse and set the context for the continuation of hegemonic abortion narratives with far-reaching negative impacts.

Black Mirror and the Danger of Hegemonic Abortions on Television

One example of a more contemporary abortion representation on television that offers dangerous inaccurate information that further perpetuates abortion stigma is a recent episode of the science-fiction hit show, *Black Mirror.* The episode, "Arkangel," centers around a mother and daughter, Marie and Sara. Early on in the episode, Sara's mother decides to have the Arkangel implant—a tracking and monitoring device—put into her child. The episode takes a disturbing turn when Arkangel allows Marie to see her daughter having sex, and also to find out that Sara is pregnant. Marie then goes to the pharmacy, buys what is depicted as emergency contraception, and sneaks it into her daughter's smoothie for breakfast.

What happens next is what makes the episode so dangerous; Sara ends up vomiting at school and going to the school nurse who tells her, "It was the E.C. pill that made you sick" ("Arkangel"). When Sara asks her what E.C. is, the nurse conflates emergency contraception (more commonly known as the morning after pill and/or "Plan B") with medication abortion, when she says: "Emergency contraception. For terminating a pregnancy…It will work in spite of the vomiting. You don't have to worry about that. You're not pregnant anymore" ("Arkangel"). This dangerous conflation of emergency contraception with the abortion medication option (more commonly known as the abortion pill) may seem relatively minimal and therefore harmless.[8] However, the stakes here are particularly high, as research indicates that media representations of abortion in particular can play a crucial role in normalizing and demystifying abortion, but they can also have the opposite effect.

According to Kissling, many viewers get information on abortion and other health care procedures from television, "and more than half of viewers believe health information from primetime television to be accurate" (Loc. 1427). With this context in mind, the danger that arises from how "Arkangel" conflates emergency contraception with the abortion pill makes more sense; many viewers may walk away from watching this episode of *Black Mirror* believing this inaccurate medical information. Viewers may have been further convinced that this information is verifiable as true by the character who delivers the information: a nurse, a figure who evokes trust and thus inadvertently suggests the information presented is medically accurate as opposed to science fiction.

[8] To explain the conflation that occurred in this episode more specfically, emergency contraception (or the morning after pill, Plan B) prevents pregnancy after unprotected sex by stopping or delaying ovaries from releasing an egg. It's more effective the earlier you take it, as fertilization doesn't typically happen right away. However, emergency contraception does not induce an abortion if fertilization has already occurred; in other words, if you're pregnant and you take emergency contraception then it will not work. In contrast, the abortion pill is two different medications to take to terminate an existing, confirmed pregnancy; the first pill, mifepristone, is taken at the medical provider's office and blocks progesterone, the hormone needed for pregnancy to continue; the second pill, misoprostol, is taken at home. It induces a process similar to an early miscarriage, wherein the uterus begins emptying, causing cramping and symptoms associated with a heavy period ("The Abortion Pill").

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this type of conflation between emergency contraception and the abortion pill was a hallmark of an argument used in the *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores* (2014) Supreme Court decision, which allowed employers to refuse to cover birth control in employee's health insurance based on religious or moral grounds, as outlined in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993). In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby,* the case rested on Hobby Lobby's argument that "the contraception requirement forces religious corporations to fund what they consider abortion, which goes against their stated religious principles" ("Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores"). This argument mirrors the inaccuracy of "Arkangel," insofar as it represents emergency contraception as akin to an abortion.

The fact that this *Black Mirror* episode used the same rhetorical tropes as conservative anti-abortion advocates in this episode, inadvertently or not, to dangerously conflate emergency contraception with medical abortion points to how pervasive dominant cultural discourses of abortion are in popular discourse and in representations of abortion in popular culture. By airing this episode, *Black Mirror* reifies the same stigmas and inaccuracies that are pervasive in dominant public discourses of abortion, which points to the urgency of reproductive justice counternarratives to present viewers with alternative, counter-hegemonic abortion representations that do not misrepresent the scientific facts behind the abortion procedure.

The Radical Potential of Counter-Hegemonic Abortion Representations on Television

As the storyline in *Scandal*'s "Baby It's Cold Outside" indicates, counter-hegemonic abortion representations are emerging more frequently in popular culture. On Season 5 of Shonda Rhimes's hit show *Scandal,* Episode 9, "Baby It's Cold Outside," tells the story of Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington) having an abortion. However, the episode does not center the abortion procedure itself, rather it centers the abortion debate as it takes place on a national stage. Olivia's abortion itself is barely focused on at all; this is what makes this particular representation of abortion so laud worthy as a counter to dominant mainstream cultural discourses of abortion.

In the episode, Mellie Grant (who is the junior Senator from Virginia at this point in the show) is in the Senate, which is about to vote on a budget bill. Mellie stalls the vote, as the funding for Planned Parenthood has been moved to the discretionary column, meaning (as Mellie says): "Planned Parenthood will still be fully funded. True. But if it's moved to discretionary, then that money could be taken away at any time, in future spending bills" ("Baby It's Cold Outside"). Mellie's speech here has parallels with that of a real-life former Texas State Senator, Wendy Davis, who recently lost a campaign for Governor of Texas. In 2013, Wendy Davis became a national feminist household name for a 10 hour and 45-minute filibuster, as an attempt to block an incredibly unconstitutional and restrictive anti-abortion TRAP law in Texas. Win or lose, her campaign was a landmark moment for Democrats in Texas, especially proponents of abortion access and reproductive rights, as Davis was one of the first (if not the first) state Senator to publicly support abortion in the way that Davis did—as a human right, not a choice of last resort.

Shameless*'s Two Different Depictions of Abortion: Fiona and Debbie, and Lower-Income Women's Precarity in Access to Abortion*

Another example of a more recent counter-hegemonic abortion representation on television is in *Shameless*, which has two abortion plotlines that really delve into the complexities of the abortion experience for lower-class patients who lack the necessary financial resources to access an abortion, thus must add that additional stress into the other myriad factors that go into an abortion decision. For example, *Shameless* speaks to the harmful impact of Henry Hyde's anti-abortion legislation. Reenacted by Congress every year since 1976, the Hyde Amendment "ended Medicaid funding of abortions, effectively targeting poor women, young women, Indigenous women, and women of color" (Bond Leonard 45). The pro-choice framework for abortion set forth in *Roe v. Wade* created openings for abortion funding restrictions like Hyde, restrictions that continue to be enacted today at an alarming rate.

The Hyde Amendment and other federal and state funding restrictions on abortion make it more difficult for women to get earlier abortions. Not only does this put patient safety in jeopardy, as earlier abortions are safer than later abortions, it also puts patients' ability to obtain an abortion in jeopardy; early abortions are about $500, which low-income patients already struggle to afford. According to a report from the Guttmacher Institute, around a third of low-income patients already cannot pay for the $500 abortion procedure without assistance, and around another third must use a credit card or obtain a loan to pay for the procedure, which highlights that with more restrictions against abortion, low-income folks have less access to the procedure (Sonfield). This is clearly the case in *Shameless*; Fiona has to reschedule her abortion procedure numerous times when unforeseen circumstances come up including financial barriers—a common experience of low-income patients that can jeopardize their access to abortion altogether.

The show cleverly juxtaposes two perspectives on abortion, with two intersecting abortion storylines—Fiona, who wants to get an abortion, and Debbie, who does not. The conversations between Debbie and Fiona that take place across a few episodes really highlight the nuances and complexities of abortion experiences in ways that counter any universal, singular representation of abortion. Since she did not plan her pregnancy (in fact, she only found out about it through a mandatory drug test required in her promotion at her diner job), Fiona is sure about her decision not to raise another child. It's never even a question whether she will or she won't—she's clearly going to get the abortion from the start, and does everything she can to convince her younger sister, Debbie to make the same decision. However, Debbie is representative of the dominant cultural discourse of abortion from the anti-abortion perspective —one that equates abortion with murder.

The juxtaposition of Fiona and Debbie's perspectives on abortion (with both also framed by their experiences in a low-income large family with unreliable parents) creates space for an incorporation of the pro-life perspective that does not agree with it, but rather exposes its hypocrisy. This is evident through how the only person who supports Debbie's decision to keep her baby is the Gallagher family's father, Frank, an alcoholic who loves to talk about how he is the father of the family yet leaves all the responsibility of taking care of his children to Fiona, his oldest child. Frank accompanies Debbie to her ultrasound, which she is mandated to have despite

it not being medically necessary. This reflects the reproductive politics of our current moment. Anti-abortion politicians have succeeded in passing forced ultrasound laws that mandate ultrasounds for any patient seeking an abortion (which is an example of one of many TRAP [Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers] laws passed in the last decade), despite the lack of medical necessity for this procedure.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 26 states have some type of ultrasound regulation for abortion providers, with 10 states requiring mandatory ultrasounds on all abortion patients (with 9/10 requiring the abortion provider to ask the patient if she wants to view the ultrasound before the procedure and four states requiring patients to look at the ultrasound, whether they want to or not—strategies that obviously violate human rights and serve as coercive tactic designed to shame/guilt women into not obtaining abortions) ("TRAP"). Considering ultrasounds alongside abortion representations in popular culture and how they function to oftentimes perpetuate widespread anti-abortion discourses and stigmas, ultrasounds also function as proponents of abortion stigma, by intervening in socially and culturally constructed norms around pregnancy. These norms then translate into the dominant abortion discourses that are circulated through abortion representations in popular culture, as in this episode of *Shameless,* wherein Debbie is depicted as getting an early ultrasound as if it's medically necessary, even though it's not.

As Erica Millar argues, "the norm of foetal motherhood has been consolidated alongside the proliferation of foetal imagery and ultrasound technologies, which have given visual form and cultural authority to the ideology of foetal autonomy…Foetocentric grief has emerged in the same period as these technological advances" (139-140). Millar's argument points to early reproductive surveillance as a precursor to anti-abortion advocates' strategies to delimit abortion access today. Understanding those strategies goes hand-in-hand with understanding how and why normative abortion discourse developed as it did and how it still impacts dominant cultural discourses of abortion today, especially through how the normative responses to abortion are represented as sorrow, shame, regret, and/or deep emotional turmoil. In Debbie's abortion plotline in *Shameless,* these dominant discourses of abortion are clearly at play, as Debbie feels morally obligated to not have an abortion based on her understanding of abortion as murder, an understanding constituted by dominant discourses of abortion and in mainstream representations of abortion that subscribe to dominant cultural understandings of abortion as always a negative "choice."

However, the way that Fiona responds to Frank's support of Debbie's pregnancy is illustrative of how we might consider Fiona's abortion as a counternarrative for its counter-hegemonic depiction of an abortion. For example, Fiona calls Frank out on the hypocrisy of his pro-life anti-abortion argument during an "abortion intervention" that he has staged to try and get Fiona to keep her baby: "Fiona…We are here to stop you from destroying your soul, this family, and my legacy, which all live in the form of a defenseless fetus in your womb!" ("The F Word") Frank says, slurred, drunk and stumbling across the room. Of course, Fiona laughs at him and asks him if he's serious, and when he became religious. The way that Fiona counters Frank's response is particularly illustrative of how this episode counters dominant abortion discourses structured by pro-life politics: to Frank's comment, she says, "No, they just abandon their kids once they have them, or they drink so much they can't remember them" ("The F Word"). Fiona's

retort highlights the hypocrisy of a pro-life perspective that claims to value lives yet gives single mothers and struggling families no assistance after they have children.

Fiona's experience having practically raised her siblings gives her a unique perspective and frames her rationale for wanting an abortion, as she already knows what forced motherhood essentially feels like. Perhaps this is where Fiona's bold, unapologetic language comes from when she's discussing her upcoming procedure with her boyfriend, Sean. For example, when Sean asks Fiona if she's nervous about her abortion procedure tomorrow, she says, "Abortion, you mean? You can say the word. And no…Can't wait to get it sucked out" ("The F Word"). This language is a particular highlight of this episode, and part of what makes it a counter-hegemonic abortion representation—Fiona is steadfast in her decision from the get-go, and unapologetic about it too.

Shameless's abortion representation is particularly noteworthy for the purposes of my thesis for how it explicitly engages with reproductive justice abortion advocacy efforts in the episodes itself. In the "#AbortionRules" episode, Fiona sends Debbie a series of texts about why she should get an abortion. Fiona ends every text with a hashtag, such as in these texts: "75% of teenage moms never find a spouse #BestToAbort…#65% of teenage moms never finish high school #AbortionOrBust…#AbortionRules" ("#AbortionRules). This use of hashtags echoes that of numerous abortion advocacy campaigns that share stories and abortion information via social media (some of which I will discuss in Chapter Four), so the way the show nods to the abortion advocacy taking place in real life in this episode is really unique and impactful.

Visually, Fiona's abortion scene itself can also be seen as countering dominant abortion discourses. Whereas the majority of abortions on television focus on how hard the decision is to make, including a lot of images and zoom-in shots on apologetic women's faces as they sit in doctors' offices, *Shameless'*s unapologetic pro-abortion rhetoric discursively constructs the procedure as a normal medical procedure. While Fiona's abortion does include one visual trope in how she is depicted as looking up into the ceiling contemplatively for a moment, as if she's second-guessing her decision, ultimately the visual time given to the abortion itself is sparse. She is given valium and ibuprofen and the nurse tells her, "You might feel a cramp now. It's similar to a period cramp but sharper. Hang tight. You can hold my hand if you need to" ("NSFW"), an offer Fiona refuses. The scene then cuts to her walking out and meeting Sean. Fiona responded to her abortion like how I would respond to waiting at the BMV—she was annoyed, and hungry. The first thing she said afterwards when Sean asks her how she feels is "Un-pregnant…and starving…I'll be honest, I'm devastated I'm not drinking a milkshake right now" ("NSFW"). This is powerful because it disrupts the notion that every woman who gets an abortion should feel ashamed, or that there should be a sense of mourning afterwards; instead. Fiona's response to her abortion offers an alternative response to an abortion—one that many women experience—that of relief and even joy.[9] This is an important contribution to a still-emerging

[9] To be more specific, according to Sisson and Rowland's recent study (2017), the psychological consequences of an abortion are vastly overexaggerated in the majority of mainstream abortion plotlines on television (27). In particular, 11% of plotlines depict exaggerated adverse effects, and 4% go as far to depict post-abortion suicides (Sisson and Rowland 27).

counterdiscourse of abortion narratives, and one that disrupts a dominant narrative that vastly misrepresents post-abortion responses.

In our current moment, the circulation of more counter-hegemonic abortion representations on television, especially those created by women of color and/or other marginalized groups, goes hand-in-hand with the global embrace of the reproductive framework. The examples traced here are just a few examples of the still-emerging rise of counter-hegemonic representations of abortion in contemporary television, which has become a medium for more radical abortion representations. These counter-hegemonic representations correlate with key tenets of the RJT framework, and when reading them through that lens they point us towards other, alternative ways of understanding abortion in order to lift its stigma and point towards how we may achieve real reproductive justice in our time.

Chapter Four: Bridging Theory and Practice through Counternarratives: Imagining Abortion and Reproductive Justice as Freedom

Abortion may have been made legal after *Roe,* but it has always been far from accessible for many, especially the most marginalized communities such as low-income women of color. Further, the deeply flawed transnational anti-abortion movement has increasingly adopted strategies relying on abortion stigma to make their case to illegalize abortion altogether. The stakes could not be higher than they are now. In the U.S. context, the anti-abortion strategies that have successfully chipped away at access to abortion and contraception more broadly include Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers (TRAP) laws, blocks on funding abortion at the federal level, and blocks on more wide-ranging family planning services.[10]

Further, despite the Supreme Court's ruling in *Whole Women's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016) that TRAP laws are unconstitutional, the Trump Administration, Congress, and Republican-controlled state legislatures continue to support and introduce these laws across the country. Currently 28 states have at least two TRAP laws that directly contradict scientific evidence, and more than half of the women of reproductive age in the U.S. live in one of those states (Benson Gold and Nash 53). Reflecting the anti-abortion movement's transnational agenda, the Trump administration has also reinstated the Global Gag rule, despite evidence that cutting U.S. global health assistance for family planning results in more abortions globally, as well as more global deaths as a result.[11] Yet despite all evidence of the long-term detrimental effects to public health, every day we are subject to more news about anti-abortion legislative and judicial victories, and things are getting worse every day.

Stigmas and access barriers to various reproductive healthcare procedures (especially abortion) have emerged culturally, as part of a historic and discursive process that has shifted epistemological framings of what counts as a choice vs. what counts as a right. As this chapter

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[10] For example, in the United States, 23 states have passed TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) laws based on no scientific evidence; these laws are solely to make abortion inaccessible by imposing medically unnecessary and often unviable restrictions on abortion patients, providers, and clinics (*Guttmacher,* "TRAP"). Similarly, 18 states now have passed restrictions of public funding for family planning which are centered around abortion but affect a large variety of reproductive healthcare services. For example, "15 states restrict the allocation of state family planning funds [and] 11 states prohibit state family planning funds from going to any entity that provides abortions" (*Guttmacher,* "State Family Planning"), despite the Hyde Amendment's prohibition on Medicaid being used to pay for any abortion services since 1976. Read in context with the Hyde Amendment, these TRAP laws are examples of unnecessary and undue burdens on not just abortion access, but also multiple other reproductive health-care concerns centered on the state's ideological views against abortion rather than being based in factual and scientific evidence.

[11] This time, Trump's enactment of the Global Gag Rule cuts about $8.8 million in U.S. global aid for health assistance, not just for family planning programs but also funding that goes towards HIV/AIDs prevention, prevention and treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, and even basic hygiene programs. This is a poignant example of a transnational anti-abortion policy based in no scientific evidence; a 2011 Stanford University study analyzed abortion rates in 20 African countries after the Bush administration's enactment of its Global Gag Rule in 2001 and found that "women were up to 2.73 times more likely to get abortions than women in countries where the policy was not applied" (Elbagir et al.), showing the redundancy and ineffectiveness of such transnational anti-abortion measures.

has begun to trace, many of the same original access barriers to reproductive freedom and justice still exist today. Throughout this thesis, I have tried to point to the urgency (especially in our current political moment in mid-2018, wherein abortion access becomes more and more precarious by the day) of not more abortion stories, but more counter-hegemonic abortion stories in circulation in public discourse. Though access to abortion is more precarious than ever, that makes stories more important than ever. Stigma-lifting abortion counternarratives have the potential to intervene in dominant discourses through centering human rights instead of laws, and by telling abortion stories from a variety of marginalized perspectives, rather than universalizing dominant narratives.

To come full circle, this conclusion ends by revisiting activist storytelling campaigns, like the "Together for Yes" campaign in Ireland. I conclude by briefly mentioning some of the most poignant abortion storytelling campaigns currently ongoing, and undertaken by reproductive justice advocates. As an academic and an activist, I hope this thesis may add to the emerging body of reproductive justice theory (RJT) in the academy, and offer up my use of RJT as another theoretical tool for those who aim to engage in counter-hegemonic work.

These digital and in-person activist abortion storytelling campaigns are ones that I have interacted with personally—as both a witness and a participant—and I know them to be valuable examples of how stories are being used in practice by reproductive justice advocates in our current moment. My goal in this conclusion is to point towards an alternative future; as the urgency for reproductive politics to utilize the radical potential of reproductive justice rises, if these types of RJT-based counter-hegemonic abortion storytelling campaigns continue to multiply in numbers and influence, then perhaps counter-hegemonic abortions representations could help change what constitutes normative abortion discourse.[12]

Abortion Storytelling as an Activist Strategy: Examples from RJ in Praxis

Advocates for Youth's "1 in 3 Abortion Campaign" is an example of an activist abortion storytelling project that uses stories to engage and promote action in support of abortion access. They are also very concerned with eradicating the stigma and shame around abortion and believe storytelling can help with that process, and with building a "culture of compassion, empathy, and support for access to basic health care" (Advocates for Youth). The "1 in 3 Campaign" is one of the oldest digital abortion storytelling campaigns and claims to use strategies from the third-wave feminist movement that utilizes personal experiences and stories to inspire action and promote change. Their website highlights abortion stories from all backgrounds, and also has a live-updating blog feed of stories available online. For example, in this year's Abortion Speakout, they highlighted abortion stories from trans people, mothers, and people of color across the country.

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[12] I hope to further develop this chapter as part of my PhD work; this barely scratches the surface of the amazing projects out there, but due to the limits of the thesis and my scope, this is all I could include in this project. I hope to revisit this topic and do some more in-depth analyses, using specific examples from these activist storytelling campaigns to illustrate the powerful counter-hegemonic potential of RJT counternarratives used in practice, as activist strategies.

Another popular project, #ShoutYourAbortion began as a social media campaign for folks to share their abortion stories in order to destigmatize and normalize the experience. Beginning on September 19, 2015, with activists Lindy West, Amelia Bonow, and Kimberly Morrison sharing their abortion stories, the project began as a response to the undercover video controversy with Planned Parenthood in 2015 (wherein anti-abortion activists lied about procedures at Planned Parenthood clinics and have since been charged for their crimes) that prompted the U.S. House of Representatives to attempt to defund Planned Parenthood. However, after these activists shared their stories, the hashtag "#ShoutYourAbortion" became extremely popular, resulting in tens of thousands of women sharing their abortion experiences via social media (ShoutYourAbortion).

Now, the project is a de-centralized storytelling project; this differentiates it from the other storytelling projects on my list, which are mostly affiliated with non-profit organizations, whereas #ShoutYourAbortion is made up of anyone who participates via social media. The women who started the project have recently created this website, which includes a blog for abortion stories to be shared (again, similar to the 1 in 3 Campaign and We Testify), and also includes a variety of resources for folks to use when hosting abortion storytelling events. The project has also opened a store to raise money for abortion access. Thus, while it is similar to the other abortion storytelling projects on my list, it's also different for how de-centralized it is, and how viral this hashtag has been for three years.

"We Testify" is an abortion storytelling project from the National Network of Abortion Funds, which is a non-profit social justice organization that aims to combine various movement-building strategies, including storytelling and fundraising, to "remove financial and logistical barriers to abortion access" (National Network of Abortion Funds*)*. Like the "1 in 3 Campaign," this storytelling project aims to shift the way culture depicts and understands abortion through centering the stories of marginalized people, especially rural, queer, and people of color. This project also focuses on building power and actually funding abortions for low-income women through fundraising and selling their own merchandise; this is an example of how these digital storytelling campaigns are combining stories with activist praxis, which I aim to do with my thesis (with this zine as the praxis). Further, this abortion storytelling project relies heavily on the reproductive justice theory and movement-building framework.

Heart-to-Heart NNAF Abortion Conversations Toolkit

I want to end this thesis by examining a poignant example of RJT storytelling as praxis that I've personally worked with, an activist grassroots campaign from the National Network of Abortion Funds (NNAF), "Heart-to-Heart Abortion Conversations." As NNAF explains, this is not the typical activist campaign: "It's a card deck, toolkit, and a process YOU can shape. You are invited to change culture and shift stigma around the topic of abortion through powerful, values-based conversations" (National Network of Abortion Funds). NNAF provides the deck of cards online for free as well as an accompanying toolkit to help activists use the cards in their organizations.

The toolkit helped me personally use this tool in praxis in my reproductive justice work, and also provides a clear connection between RJT's focus on storytelling as an integral part of its

radical potential. The toolkit explains this connection poignantly, in its section on why this project is important:

> We believe dialogue, storytelling, and intentional conversations are powerful tools for organizing and strengthening our movement… This guide will support you in having meaningful conversations about abortion and issues that relate to abortion as well as share why you support abortion funds. We see you as a catalyst and bridge-builder working as a part of this powerful network…By tapping into love and empathy, speaking from our values, and seeking to understand — and really hear — others, we will be able to connect and build relationships, even when we don't agree on everything about abortion. ((National Network of Abortion Funds)

The RJ rhetoric in this toolkit is in stark contrast to pro-choice rhetoric; RJ rhetoric emphasizes the importance of contextualizing abortion in a larger matrix of context and oppressions, which is also noteworthy for RJT's emphasis on building coalitions across difference. This activist project emphasizes the potential of storytelling to enact change in praxis, regarding both in its potential to facilitate new connections as well as its potential to lift abortion stigma. And one of the beauties of RJT is its possibilities for expansion and connections.

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Overall, though is much work left to be done on abortion storytelling projects as resistance, this examination of abortion stories has highlighted two key aspects of reproductive justice's theory of storytelling: why stories matter as a means to destabilize dominant narratives about abortion that falsely universalize the experience and prohibit abortion access; and the limits of individual narratives framed through individualistic, self-help based, pro-choice framework to make change in praxis. As reproductive justice theory emphasizes, storytelling is most powerful when paired with other strategies to enact change in praxis, and this chapter delves into those nuances.

Reading abortion stories through the RJT storytelling framework can provide us with vital counternarratives that resist these harmful, dominant, hegemonic abortion narratives. By reading abortion narratives as textual action through the framework of reproductive justice, these texts can intervene between women's embodied experiences and the political discourse around abortion and create an opening for transformation in praxis, and a bridge between women's experiences and contentious politics can be possible. RJT frameworks allow feminist advocates to work together in coalition to avoid this trap. And RJ counternarratives can intervene to prevent the co-optation of stories and strategies through RJT's radical framework through centering experiences erased by dominant narratives and using strategies that allow us to imagine a future outside of our inherently flawed present system—an alternative future of reproductive justice for all.

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