



Book Review

Without Apology: Writings on Abortion in Canada

Stettner, Shannon (Ed.). (2016), Edmonton, AB: AU Press. ISBN 9781771991599 (paper) CDN\$29.95; ISBN 9781771991605 (PDF) CDN\$29.95; ISBN 9781771991612 (ePub) CDN\$29.95. 355 pages

REBECCA SCOTT YOSHIZAWA
Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada

In reading *Without Apology: Writings on Abortion in Canada*, edited by Shannon Stettner (2016), it becomes clear that abortion experiences resonate broadly both socially and politically as much as they are also intimate to interpersonal relations and individual subjectivities and embodiments. Voices from different stakeholders and communities relay violence, oppression, pain, confusion, resolve, and even joy. Such voices are not often spoken loudly, let alone heard. To that end, Stettner collected academic and non-academic autoethnographic voices on abortion. This was a challenge, considering the systematic silencing of those who have had abortions. In the introduction, Stettner discusses her objectives of destigmatizing and normalizing talk about abortion through foregrounding the voices of those who have experienced them. She identifies the subtle perpetuation of stigma, even among those who identify as pro-choice, hinged on a powerful argument that it is predominantly structural factors, and not personal decisions, that give rise to the conditions of reproduction (see MacQuarrie's essay). Stettner suggests that we can see the discourse of "choice" as a kind of strategic bargain with a society that would otherwise not be amenable to talking about abortion. However, this discourse can be politicized following, as Stettner argues, activists and scholars who have moved instead to talking about reproductive justice. This movement is young in Canada and sets the scene for the collection.

It is difficult to read this book. It is heartbreaking and enraging. For example, stories in Part 1 that impact the reader with force and weight

Correspondence Address: Rebecca Scott Yoshizawa, Sociology, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 12666 72 Avenue, Surrey, BC, V3W 2M8; Email: rebecca_yoshizawa@kpu.ca

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include: being required to cry before a board in order to improve chances of having an abortion approved (Hurley); having pamphlets forced upon her against her desire and writing a pro and con list (Woolford); filling out a survey question asking if there is any chance of being pregnant while already at the “Termination of Pregnancy Unit” being told that the level of pain during the procedure is relative to the amount of anxiety one feels (Hornbeck); bracing an unsupportive and oblivious partner (Kirsten); experiencing forcible pregnancy (Roberts); and hearing one’s father talk about “irresponsible women” a month after an abortion (Mackenzie).

In Part 2 on activism, we see chapters attending to laws and advocacy. Highlights are Egan and Gardner’s piece on the history of the Ontario Coalition of Abortion Clinics, formed in the early 1980s. The coalition “tried to ensure that the demand for abortion access was never seen in isolation but as one of a number of interdependent struggles” (p. 133). Early illegal clinics were attended, they write, by “heroines” who proved that these clinics needed to exist. Clinics were raided, and criminal charges brought to practitioners. As we know today, anti-abortion laws were ultimately struck down making abortion effectively legal – but this does not mean widely accessible. A legal abortion clinic opened in PEI only in 2017. Even so, bills are routinely introduced to criminalize the procedure. Activists respond; Ahmad and “The Radical Handmaids” write about dressing in costumes referencing Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and bringing knitted uteri to Parliament Hill to protest a 2012 attempt.

Read together, most of the chapters in Part 3 on opposition are tied by observations of a strong thread of religiosity underpinning the anti-abortion movement. Lochwin’s essay details her being forced by her mother to participate in fundamentalist Christian anti-choice “activism” during her free time, but later completely embracing socialist and feminist perspectives. Anderson questions what it would mean to have been adopted while also being pro-choice. West discusses pregnancies that result from rape. The pieces are deeply critical; it’s worth quoting West’s words here since they are rarely seen in academic collections. Relating the violence, oppression, and misery a pregnancy can bring to some, she writes, “and NONE of that shit is God’s plan. That’s us fucking up God’s plan” (p. 189).

In Part 4 on practitioners, the reader learns what it is like to provide abortions. It is very evocative to read the phrase “it wasn’t long before abortion became my whole life” from Cooke (p. 239). Mullan, an abortion counsellor, identifies a contradiction not readily recognized by anti-choice ideologues: “almost all of us make the decision to end a pregnancy because we love and value children; we want to be able to be good mothers. We take a long, hard look at our lives and we realize that we are unable to provide properly... This is a decision made in a profoundly ethical and moral framework, one that is based on valuing children” (p. 248). Even as a staunchly pro-choice feminist, I am struck by the anonymous abortion

provider “Dr. James” sense of self: “I am proud to provide abortions” (p. 262). The section is rich and harrowing and reveals a complex of struggles.

In Part 5 on sites of struggle, chapters contemplate how pro-choice politics can extend to an embracing of a praxis of reproductive justice. Stote writes of the reproductive oppressions Indigenous women experience as a result of colonialism. Forced sterilization, abortions without anaesthesia, and the tendency to prescribe the dangerous but long-acting Depo-provera are examples of the far and insidious reach of a colonizing and – truly – genocidal state. Alongside Stettner’s concluding calls to shift the discourse to reproductive justice, improve provisions, address the asymmetrical responsibility women have for fertility, meaningfully recognize how privileges and oppressions will differently affect different women, and connect activists of different causes, Stote’s piece points also to the need to indigenize reproductive justice.

The book offers a fine collection of stories and perspectives, enriching the discourse about abortion and reproductive justice in Canada. Even so, Stettner’s own introduction flags important oversights of the book. She writes of the Indigenous, trans, and non-binary voices missing from the book: “At the time I issued the call for papers, I had not yet considered their reproductive experiences. This is an erasure that I regret and would not reproduce if I were to reissue the call today” (p. 14). I appreciate her discussion of limitations in considering the impact and significance of this work.

Reflecting on the collection as a whole, I am struck by the ways in which the stories and experiences continue on in the real-time, real world struggle for reproductive justice both in Canada and globally. When I drive on Highway 1 toward Chilliwack from the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, anti-choice billboards pepper the landscape. In Judith Mintz’ chapter, an autoethnography of abortion after emergency contraceptive was ineffective, she writes of calling Motherisk to discuss risks of birth defects from a failed “morning after” pill. We now know that Motherisk is embroiled in its own horrific injustices, perpetuated by its flawed hair-testing laboratory that led to state-sanctioned kidnapping of many children in eastern Canada (Law, 2018). Worldwide, 25.5% of people reside in countries where abortion is completely restricted and about 14% where abortion is only permitted to save the life of the pregnant person.¹ As of this writing, Ireland is set to hold a referendum on legalizing abortion. In Trump’s America, undocumented migrant teens in custody are denied abortions (Gresko, 2018). When the reader sets these facts against the horrific experiences described in the book in Canada, where abortion is not even illegal, it becomes clear that global reproductive justice

¹ Approximately 40% of the world’s population lives in countries with permissive abortion laws, where one can legally get an abortion for any reason. For these statistics and how they are measured, see <http://worldabortionlaws.com/questions.html>. Some recent gains have been made; in March of 2018, a historic referendum held in Ireland approved an amendment to the constitution to permit legal abortion.

will not come easily or quickly. *Without Apology* is a commendable survey of abortion in Canada that gives space to a wide range of voices while also acknowledging the work still to be done.

References

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