part one

Speaking from Experience
An Abortion Palimpsest
Writing the Hidden Stories
of Our Bodies

Judith Mintz

Women’s autobiography is distinguished by its uneasy relationship to the body and maternity.

Kristi Siegel

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

Hélène Cixous

Time measures our experiences and gives perspective. When we read texts that we ourselves have written about our experiences, we often
can regard these pasts with a clarity that we only wish we had had when we recorded them. Feminist life-writing theorist Helen Buss points out that autobiographical writing also allows for a discursive construction of the self, the meanings of which are encoded within the writing itself. In other words, women have often constructed their lives through writing in order to simultaneously reveal and conceal particular issues related to experiences such as pregnancy, miscarriage, and childbirth. In earlier writings, Buss explains the importance of decoding such writing: the decoding “allows the researcher to mitigate the silence that male-centred language imposed on women’s real lives.”

The following personal narrative traces my own coded experience of abortion in Ontario, Canada, at the turn of the twenty-first century. This narrative attempts to unwind some of the tangled social stigma associated with abortion by revealing the psychosocial considerations of such a decision. The diary entries illustrate the tension between maintaining a normal appearance and negotiating the embodied changes associated with the first trimester of pregnancy. By analyzing my own diary and comparing what I wrote with my memory, I will decode missing information in an effort to give voice to the stories that remain hidden in my body. As Cixous says, it is imperative that women put themselves back into texts, which is my intention in this narrative. My text becomes the source for my analysis of the discourse that filtered my emotional experience of abortion. Despite abortion being legal in Ontario, it still is a site of constrained expression.

I take the liberty here to suggest that the discourse that I deconstruct is not unlike that of other women whose careers and relationships were in their infancy. I liked the idea of becoming a mother and anticipated the potential joys that I imagined children could bring into my life, but only on terms that could accommodate my life’s path and personal timeline. Sometimes, I felt this craving in my body, but it persisted in issuing monthly bloody reminders to my mind that, at the age of twenty-nine, I hadn’t yet established a solid career or relationship.

22 February 2001
I took the morning-after pill yesterday. We needed to make a quick decision about our mistake. This big dose of estrogen and progesterone is making me nauseous so I take Gravol. I feel stoned and go to sleep. My stomach is giving me mixed signals between nausea and hunger
and pain. I’ll get over this. I am trying to get through this on my own because I want to be my own strong container for myself.

Contemplating my situation, I also struggled with what I thought I should be as a woman versus what I thought my partner wanted me to be.

22 February 2001
Stopping the potential conception of a child was almost difficult to do. But now is definitely not the time for us to get pregnant.

23 February
Fatigue today, feet hurt during yoga practice and mild headache. Took a sauna and felt better, but fatigue lingers. I taught a private yoga class and came home wanting to nap when I usually feel energized from teaching. I had planned to help S with his business, but when he came to pick me up tonight, I told him I had to stay home and rest. He left, but I wish I could have seen him for longer, touched him and talked to him. But life is not like that, not right now.

My diary entries sound like a cry for help as I rationalized why it was okay that I did not receive more support as I moved through the discomfort of taking the emergency contraceptive pill (ECP). But the entries also read like a shopping list of things I had promised to do for S to help him with his business. On the same page where I made business notes, I also jotted down the date, 28 February, for an appointment at the Hassle Free Clinic in Toronto. I did not yet know I was pregnant, not having anticipated that the ECP would not work. I can barely decipher which notes are for S’s business and which ones relate to the situation in which I had found myself. What is clear now is that I had no plans on making changes to my lifestyle that I felt a mother should make when planning for a child to come into being.

“Open her heart and let healing start,” I wrote somewhere around 10 March. The bottom half of the page is torn out, but I don’t know why anymore. Perhaps I ripped it out because I needed to protect myself from painful truths. This filtering of my experience enabled me to compartmentalize my inner and outer lives and to perpetuate dualizing frameworks that alienate body from mind.

13 March 2001
Pouring rain. Swelling breasts, sore. No period after thirty-three days. If I don’t bleed by the dark of the moon, which is ten days from now,
I will worry. But that morning-after pill has really screwed up my system. S’s mother is in hospital again.

I dreamed last night of building a garden. I bought a ten-kilo bag each of geranium seeds, clove seeds, and lettuce. I had peaches, which I planted individually, whole, with the help of a young child. The garden was somewhat prepared already, I just had to turn the soil to wake up the ground. I had no help and I was puzzled as to how I would get around the huge puddles.

I realized a few weeks later why I continued to feel so exhausted: as in my dream, I actually was growing something. At the time of the dream, I was unable to hear its prophetic message. Interestingly, my diary never actually reveals when, exactly, I went to the doctor and got a blood test for pregnancy. I never wrote anything about that moment, and yet I recall it viscerally—hearing the results of that blood test on the phone while standing in the personal trainer office at the gym where I taught yoga and did shiatsu treatments. I did not need to record it, because I will always remember the surge of queasiness and heat in my belly when the doctor told me that I was pregnant despite having taken the ECP.

My notes in the diary describe a yoga workshop I led for high school students who were learning to become leaders in their community. I now recall how tired and nauseated I felt that evening, and how I could not consider cancelling the workshop for fear of seeming unprofessional. On 26 March, I wrote more notes from a phone call I made to Motherisk: we talked about the risk of birth defects from the ECP to the fetus. A sharp line divides the page and a note underneath declares, “ECP didn’t work!” More notes detail information about a possible abortion procedure, but nowhere on the page did I write the word abortion. Nowhere did I write how I felt. That part, I had to shut out.

In 2001, abortion was legal in Ontario, but it was, as it is now, a contested issue. Clinics that provided abortion services in Toronto in 2001 still had to protect themselves and their clients from protesters and other threats. I knew, however, that abortion services were available to me and were covered by OHIP, the Ontario Health Insurance Program. Even though a simmering stew of anti-abortion sentiment lurked near clinics, I felt secure that I could indeed have my abortion “hassle free.” I never questioned, as my mother’s generation had, whether I could have an abortion should I have an unplanned pregnancy. The historical tension from so-called pro-lifers still coloured...
abortion clinic protocol. My notes about the Choices in Health Clinic say that I could bring one support person with me to the procedure and that this person would be required to provide photo identification. A note in my diary suggests that I was concerned that S would not prioritize me and the procedure, which I had by now reluctantly agreed to undergo. I was deeply conflicted about my own choice. The idea that I was the “right” age for having a baby and settling down was not congruent with the truth of my actual life: I had a budding career as a yoga instructor and shiatsu therapist, and my relationship with the father of this child was not stable.

2 April 2001
Jennifer gave me a little foot massage and made me tea at her studio today. Nurturing is what I need and she gives. My mother told me, “there are so many people who want to take care of you,” meaning herself and my sister. I am fully aware that S may want to but is unable to take care of me. I have to let this being inside myself go. I couldn’t/don’t want to do it [have the baby and raise it] by myself, so this “accident” we’ve created must not be brought to term.

3 April
While making lunch today, the voice inside said, “I’m going against myself.” For years I have wondered, what would I do if I accidentally conceived now? I never wanted to have to go through this.

5 April
Abort baby or abort my career. And then he reminds me: “We tried to kill it.”

9 April
I called him to see if he was okay with all the plans for everything tomorrow, and he actually asked me if I could meet him there! I was so astounded I forgot to tell him that he must come in with me, otherwise they won’t let him in.

As much research and oral history has demonstrated, my mother’s generation and others before hers did not have as easy access to abortion as I did. Indeed, many women in my own generation cannot access abortion services because of their location, race, or class. The fact that my partner had to show identification and come in with me rather than his preference to either drop me off or meet me at the clinic after the procedure clearly shows that abortion service providers advocate for women’s health, safety, and

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agency by insisting that women receive support from someone throughout the entire process. My diaries from spring 2001 show that I had no awareness of women’s uneven access to abortion services in Canada. It was so simple for me to procure a timely abortion appointment in Toronto that I did not need to worry about my safety; the abortion service providers did that for me. The relative ease of having the procedure allowed me to focus instead on grieving the loss of the baby and healing my own body.

Despite the fact that abortion is legal in Ontario, many barriers remain that prevent women from receiving this medically and socially necessary service. The continuing controversy and outright condemnation of abortion by some groups means that many women are unable to find support when facing an unplanned pregnancy. My identity as a white, educated urban dweller made obtaining abortion services a trouble-free privilege. It is my hope that writing about my personal abortion experience may open doors for the expression of other people’s narratives. This narrative also demonstrates the ways in which I was, like many women, wrestling with my authentic truth, but through decoding the writing, I have revealed it.

Notes


3 I have used random letters of the alphabet as pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of individuals who are part of the narrative.

4 See, for example, Childbirth by Choice Trust, No Choice: Canadian Women Tell Their Stories of Illegal Abortions (Toronto: Childbirth by Choice Trust, 1998).