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Movable Objects: Blurring Binaries Through An Analysis of the Solo Performance To Lay Brick

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MOVABLE OBJECTS: BLURRING BINARIES THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOLO PERFORMANCE *TO LAY BRICK*

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Introduction

Abortion is a scary term. To speak about abortion is a scary task. I have learned that anxiety accompanies any discussion of abortion, specifically where women disclose the decision to abort (Weitz & Cockrill). This fear began for me in May of 2008 when an at-home pregnancy test confirmed that I was one of thousands of women cursed with an unwanted pregnancy. I say *cursed* not to frame my pregnancy as one of horror, although I certainly had a visceral emotional response. I say *cursed* because the short duration of my pregnancy and the four years since my abortion have led to the curse of heightened hearing. Not only was the pregnancy and abortion a profound physical experience in my body at the time, but also the rhetoric that surrounds the topic continues to be written on my body. I found and continue to find myself particularly jaded concerning pro-choice rhetoric. As a liberal woman who supports the pro-choice movement, I began noticing subtle ways that pro-choice rhetoric implicates me in my past decision and how the pro-choice movement influences cultural norms in relation to women's choices to abort. The power of the pro-choice movement is made possible by its oppositional relationship with the pro-life/anti-choice movement. Both hold a stake in the abortion debate and dominate the discourse of abortion. For me, I felt trapped to choose a side while feeling apathetic and cynical toward the pro-choice movement itself and those who identified as such. Soon, this apathy turned to anger. In response to the emotional whirlwind I felt, I chose to stage and to write about my experiences with abortion.

Over several years, I have spent substantial time consulting abortion literature and yet I have found few critical, experiential narratives by women who have aborted, despite the plethora of scholarship that addresses the issue of abortion generally. Although a simple Google search of "abortion narratives" will reveal website after website where women share experiences, they

lack a critical and complex view overall. Even where personal narratives were present in the research, they did not speak to my experience with either the abortion procedure, my state of being afterward, or how the presence and the discourse surrounding abortion has influenced my female identity. This was specifically true while looking for abortion narratives where women identified as "liberal" or "pro-choice," similar to my own positionality. I did not and do not feel that the pro-choice movement has provided complex or diverse examples of the female experience with abortion nor do I feel as though the rhetoric of the movement encourages other narratives to be brought forward. I first worked to fill this gap in scholarship through my solo performance, *To Lay Brick*, which focused on my relationship to abortion, drawing on communication scholarship, cultural references, and pop culture. In particular, I used specific props and staged actions to help illuminate and craft arguments made within the text of the script. This research report will analyze *To Lay Brick* by looking at how the use of those particular props made an argument about the abortion movement in general and pro-choice rhetoric in particular. In the following section I will introduce and explain key terms and rhetorical strategies relating to abortion and outline how performance became my method of self-disclosure and argumentation.

Contextualizing abortion

Central to understanding the thesis of this research report is an understanding of what I mean by "abortion" and its forms and uses within this study. I hesitate attempting to define "abortion" because of the complexity surrounding the procedure, the reasons women choose to abort, and the plethora of scholarship and media representation about abortion. For example, WebMD describes abortion simply as "the early ending of a pregnancy" ("Abortion—Topic Overview"). This study will address my experience of and relationship to abortion in a few

specific ways. First, although the procedure itself is the definitional root of the word "abortion" as seen in the above definition, I will reference my experience with abortion as both encompassing the medical procedure and also the ways rhetorical discourse has influenced my identity post-procedure. My abortion experience did not end when I left the clinic; rather, the ways that I have talked about my decision to terminate, listened to political debates about the issue, and had interpersonal conversations about abortion, also motivate and inform this study.

Similarly, to study "abortion rhetoric" or "abortion discourse" is not only to study the medical procedure but also to study the language used to construct what that experience means for certain bodies. For example, what rhetorical strategies are used to sway public opinion and legislation whether or not such procedures should be legal? How do media outlets describe women who choose to terminate? What does choice rhetoric do in and of itself? To answer these questions within American culture is to draw largely from the pro-choice and anti-choice/pro-life movements and their rhetorical constructions. These are not the only types of rhetoric present but their dominance is influential in public opinion and policy legislation. Thus, a majority of connections made under the terms "abortion rhetoric" is in reference to these dominant positions.

The broad reach of abortion rhetoric, its influence on culture, and its politically contested core speak to my overall relationship with abortion rhetoric. Post-abortion, my body was always bombarded with language and rhetoric about abortion, political debates happening nationally, and news articles about the issue. I was never outside of these cultural references and constantly implicated by them. I searched and looked for information and narratives to help me more fully make sense of and understand my own experiences as a woman who has terminated.

Shortly after my abortion, I turned to Google in hopes that a simple search of the word itself would lead to additional avenues of information. While researching "abortion" I learned

that, on average, 40% of women will choose to endure the procedure (Kliff). Assorted other statistics popped up on my screen including clinic locations and blogs devoted to debates on the legality of abortion. It seemed that the overwhelming response from the search engine was either medical and/or quantitative in nature. Although this may be useful for certain types of abortion research, it was not helpful for my own journey. What could I "add" to those numbers on the screen? As I said, abortion is a scary term; I did not and do not know what to do with the word. This is partially because "the term abortion often conjures up notions of debate and controversy about a specific medical procedure rather than the social context of gender where women are held primarily responsible for essentially all aspects of unplanned or unwanted pregnancies" (Crawley et al 228). Nowhere on Google did I find information that spoke to my experience with the procedure; it was all just medical jargon and statistical information. I did not feel particularly invited to add to such information.

Entering graduate school shifted my focus from general searches to research by women who had terminated. This led to searches specifically aimed at locating abortion narratives by women. Time and time again I went searching and, at times, I did find them. The book *Choice*, for example, is composed of a variety of personal narratives about childbirth and abortion. Carolyn Ellis has also written about her experience with abortion (*Revisions* 195-226). Certainly there are narratives of women who have terminated and narratives of women who thought about terminating ("A Personal Abortion," Kimport et al), yet these encounters did not reflect or illuminate my experience and it was time to admit that the searching was just not working for me. After reflecting on these searches along with reflecting on my own larger experiences with abortion rhetoric, I realized that writing through my own relationship with abortion was necessary and might be useful to others. I chose performance as my primary methodology for

reasons I will detail later in this study. For now, allow me to overview the performance in terms of intent, structure, and staging.

Coming to Performance

My research led, in October of 2011, to my solo performance, *To Lay Brick,* which was presented in the Department of Speech Communication's Marion Kleinau Theatre at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. *To Lay Brick* was an autoethnographic solo performance that worked to engage with the complexities surrounding my abortion. This performance was a nine part fragmented script that questioned topics of memory, abortion escorting, binaries, and politics. Specifically, the show's purpose was both to criticize and to highlight the tensions I felt and continue to feel as a woman who has had an abortion and who lives in a pro-choice body. This show spoke to my concerns that, at times, there is language from the pro-choice movement that judges women who terminate as well as participates in solidifying the strict boundaries of pro-choice vs. anti-choice. Although the rhetoric of the anti-choice movement often is based on stereotypes that a woman terminating is making a thoughtless and immoral decision, Leslie Cannold notes that pro-choice rhetoric also can serve to alienate and demean women's choices (xxix). "It is disturbing to realize that some of the pro-choice movement's own explanations and justifications of a woman's right to choose inadvertently support this politically debilitating and empirically false stereotype" (Cannold xxix). This realization led me to a critical examination of my experience with pro-choice rhetoric through performance.

To Lay Brick was a compilation of my own experiences during the abortion, my reflections on interactions with other's post-procedure, and communication scholarship about abortion. It is not my goal in this research report to "re-tell" my experiences with *To Lay Brick* or with my abortion. Rather, I am reflecting on the reason for particular performance choices and

how theory is interwoven and embodied within those choices. I will analyze selected staging choices, in particular the use of three key props, bricks, projection screens, and chalk to discover meanings not directly articulated in the script. This is not a report of the performance; it is a new document that invites discussion on my use of bricks, projection screens, and chalk as rhetorical artifacts.

Although minimalist in its aesthetic, my show had sixty bricks, two large projection screens with bodies lit behind them, and chalk that I used to write directly on the stage floor. I used props because "objects can often symbolize complex issues and experiences causing us to make deeper associations and connections" (Spry *Body* 148). These props are the artifacts that I will analyze. Not only do these props function as signs that create associations, their use in this show created rhetorical arguments as much as the actual text of the script. I will begin by historically contextualizing the abortion movement within the United States along with how scholarship has dealt with the specific structural issues addressed in the show. I will follow with commentary on my methods and a general description of the show. I will conclude the study with an in-depth analysis of the three props.

Literature Review

An exhaustive review of literature around abortion is beyond the scope of this research report. The topic of abortion has been extensively researched, analyzed, and reported about both in communication literature and other disciplines. This section is a particular thematic analysis of aspects of the abortion literature relevant to the thesis of *To Lay Brick,* specifically the interrogation of binaries present in the abortion movement. Research shows that the rhetorical underpinnings within the abortion debate constitute binaristic thinking. These binaries are sustained through specific strategies of vilification and absolutism making self-disclosure risky

for women who have terminated a pregnancy. Before analyzing the ways that binaries pervade abortion discourse, I will begin with the historical groundings of the abortion movement.

Abortion Ideology

The abortion debate has a long historical trajectory. Issues of reproductive rights spanned decades, lacking a firm constitutional basis until 1973 when the Roe v. Wade decision marked a precedent for the legality of abortions within the United States ("What is Choice"). There is, however, still vast opposition to such legality. In 2011 alone, 80 new abortion restrictions were enacted in 6 months (Johnson). The continued debates over abortion by the pro-choice and anti-choice forces have led to two well-known abortion movements within the U.S.: the 'pro-choice' and 'pro-life/anti-choice' movements. There are additional viewpoints on the issue of abortion; however, these two movements are most significant because of their prevalence within politics and also their dominance within the media. I will briefly outline these two dominant ideologies below.

The pro-choice movement uses arguments of female autonomy. Pro-choice ideology contends that a woman has the right to choose what happens to and in her body and disallowing abortion inflicts on that choice. Some feminists also contend that without choice, women will never reach societal equality (Deeb-Sossa and Kane 151). This "right to choose" argument is based on autonomous beings. In other words, "If you are autonomous, you are self-governing. You give the law to yourself, as opposed to having it imposed on you by someone else" (Carlin 6). Thus, legislation restricting access or overturning the Roe v. Wade decision are examples of state-based power that would regulate a woman's body. This example demonstrates why choice is fore grounded as the main argument within pro-choice organizations and the broader movement.

Originally, "pro-choice" was a reactive term to oppositional forces rather than one to pro-actively protect legality as it is today (Fried 1-2). This is primarily based on the long-time argument that women will choose abortion regardless of legality, thus, it should be a woman's right to choose and have access to safe and legal abortion clinics and clinic physicians. This current focus on legal abortion is embodied by the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws or, NARAL, a leading pro-choice American organization. NARAL describes itself as "made up of pro-choice women and men across the United States. Together, we protect a woman's right to choose" ("About us"). Their strategies for protecting choice include lobbying congress and making sure legal access continues. A central tenent of the pro-choice movement is not only that a woman can have autonomy over her body but also that such a choice requires that abortion be legal.

The choice discourse continues to remain dominant, however, new and important strands of literature are surfacing that both criticize and question the dominant choice framework. For example, Jennifer Denbow argues that more choices may not always be superior. Denbow explains that "in some instances—namely for an indigent, pregnant woman who wants to bring her pregnancy to term the mere existence of the option to have an abortion can undermine a woman's autonomy" (216). Gerald Dworkin follows suit by warning that choice may legitimize sex-selective abortion by allowing unwanted pressure (qtd in Denbow 219). Denbow outlines her argument by stating that, "The fear of facing societal sanctions if she bears a female child, combined with the existence of an effective option to abort, places pressure on the woman to terminate the pregnancy—pressure that would not have existed without the availability of an effective option" (219). There are larger societal issues that may influence a woman's choice thus impeding on her autonomy.

Similarly, choice does not address how and why millions of women lack access to abortion because of age, poverty, geography, language or other barriers (Fried 2). Women in poverty, for example, seek abortion disproportionately more than women of middle or upper class status (Jones 231). This is also the case for women of color (A. Smith 120). Historically, "'choice' became a symbol of middle-class women's arrival as independent consumers. Middle-class women could afford to choose. They had earned the right to choose motherhood, if they liked" (Solinger qtd in A. Smith 128). Partner and familial relationships may also influence a women's choice.

In response to these criticisms, some literature attempts to disrupt how the framework of choice dominates the abortion movement by complicating and incorporating women's narratives. Jeannie Ludlow writes, "hidden in the gap of the U.S. abortion debate is the relationship between woman and fetus, a relationship that many women consider seriously when they choose abortion" (31). Additional nuanced approaches to understanding pro-choice ideology appear in a collection of stories compiled in a book entitled *Choice*, edited by Karen Benderand Nina de Gramont. *Choice* includes differing stories of women who have struggled with pregnancy, birth control, and abortion. This book encourages spaces for narrative-based evidence where women are encouraged not to "fit" into the two boxes available but instead to erase the boxes all together. While noteworthy, particularly given their inclusion of and advocacy for experiential narratives, the pro-choice movement continues to rely on the choice framework as the dominant guiding principle, despite these nuanced essays.

The pro-life (or anti-choice) movement relies on a different set of ideological underpinnings. The larger frame of the anti-choice argument is that life begins at conception and thus any abortion kills a baby. Randall Lake, Assistant Professor of Communication at

University of Southern California and long-time scholar of abortion rhetoric, concludes that most anti-choice rhetoric is based in a tradition of theology in which abortion is a moral issue where "killing" a fetus is wrong (436). National Right to Life, a leading pro-life organization contends that the organization works toward saving future babies. Each side of the abortion issue offers different answers to questions about when life begins and what autonomy and freedom mean.

These dominant ideologies of the pro-choice and pro-life movements have guided and influenced the legality of abortion and, in turn, the relationship women have to their abortion experience. Research on disclosure outlines how perverse the abortion experience is. Post-abortion, disclosure may become a concern for women who negotiate when, where, and to whom they will disclose. Disclosure is a well-researched issue within abortion scholarship specifically related to how women feel about disclosing their abortion and what risks that disclosure may carry. Post-abortion there is fear of disclosure that renders women unwilling to discuss their abortion in public settings (Weitz & Cockrill 413), possibly due to risk of partner or abortion opponent violence (Saftlas et al 1412). There is risk in shifting out of the private sphere and into public spaces when abortion is involved (Garlough 369). The feeling of uncertainty for some women to disclose publicly speaks to a heightened need for research about why such fear exists and what underlying causes are present.

Despite the risks of disclosure and the general hesitancy to disclose for women who have terminated, Planned Parenthood distributed an "I had an abortion" t-shirt, to encourage women to publicly discuss their decisions. One study found this particular rhetorical act effective stating that "the message does not initially draw attention to itself, and it uses simple, common vernacular" (Swift 62). The ostensible strategy behind the shirt is to frame abortion as an everyday act that does not have to be traumatic or depressing; however, the study does not

include testimony from women who purchased and wore the shirt in public settings or, more importantly, why they were drawn to purchasing the shirt to begin with. The lack of agency given to women and their own experiences again speaks to the necessity of including more varied women's experiential narratives within academic research. Although diverse factors may influence a women's decision to disclose, I will specifically look at one potential factor, the prevalence of binaries within the status quo abortion movement. Understanding how binaries influence the abortion debate is particularly important given that *To Lay Brick* is a response to how these binaries influenced my abortion decision and experience.

Binaries in the Abortion Debate

Binaries are a dominant theme within abortion literature. The idea that only two sides or ideologies exist uses binaristic logic, an either/or mentality that creates a false choice. In the context of abortion, the two oppositional movements, pro-life and pro-choice, form the foundational binary of the abortion debate. Jeannie Ludlow argues that "The 'abortion debate' has settled into a system of dichotomies, such as the dichotomy between women's autonomy on the abortion rights side and the value of unborn life on the anti-abortion side" (26). There are a plethora of other potential approaches to the issue of abortion, however, the dominance of the pro-choice and pro-life rhetorics create the illusion that there are only two.

Undergirding this controversy is the argument of choice vs. life outlined above. Life is the foundational binary that the pro-life argument uses: you are either alive or not, and the presumption that life begins at conception mandates that abortion be illegal as it ends a life while the pro-choice movement endorses female autonomy, arguing that the decision should be made by the woman. With regard to abortion rhetoric, escaping these binaries is a difficult task; they are so entrenched within culture that even writing about the pro-choice and pro-life stances, I risk

perpetuating them. We currently lack language to discuss abortion without at least implicitly referencing the binaries.

A second relevant binary surrounds the public/private dichotomy. To define what a public sphere is also means defining what is not public. Kent argues that this division of the public and private underpins all liberal thinking (85). Historically, issues of childcare, sexuality, and domestic violence, all realms traditionally associated with women, have been relegated to the private sphere (Dean 384). For example, female anatomy is generally to be held private. For example, issues of menstruation and abortion are generally considered by American culture topics that cannot be publicly discussed by women. The logic in pro-choice rhetoric is that the body is a private space, an individualized self that belongs to the woman and is thus under the control of that woman. Excluding female anatomy to the private sphere underscores how the private sphere is sustained through pro-choice rhetoric.

A final binary is specific to how women are framed in opposition to the fetus. This either/or dichotomy evident in literature and abortion debates when arguments are framed as either for the woman or the fetus. Generally, the pro-choice movement argues on the side of the woman while the pro-life movement argues on the side of the fetus or baby. Specifically in terms of pro-choice ideology, the concern with "choice" underscores a dichotomy between 'women' vs. 'fetus.' The pro-choice movement still falls into a frame of "a woman" and "fetus" or "a woman" and "child" (Ludlow 28). This binaristic rhetoric sustains thinking that the woman and fetus are somehow detached entities and that a woman's body is in opposition to the fetus as opposed to a more complicated understanding of women's pregnant bodies.

Language is central to how these binaries are created and how they continue to be dominant within the abortion movement. Language choice within political parties is one

example of how such framing is sustained (Snoeck 333, Feldt). The use of the term baby, for example, signifies that it is a life to be sustained while fetus implies that it is not yet a child. Using baby or fetus in political discourse is one illustration of how the pro and anti choice ideologies construct dominant associations within the abortion movement.

Similarly, how language has been used over time highlights the ways the public/private dichotomy has come to fruition. Asen and Brouwer discuss how "public" and "private" are not fixed, content-specific categories that structure the public sphere prior to discourse. Rather, "'public' and 'private' emerge in social action and dialogue…Boundary drawing and maintenance constitute perpetual performances enacted through public discourse" (10). This demonstrates how relevant social discourse has been in creating the public/private binary and also highlights how central rhetoric is in the creation of binaries generally.

Above I have outlined the pro-choice/pro-life dichotomy, the public/private dichotomy, and the 'women' vs. 'fetus dichotomy as binarisitc modes within abortion rhetoric**.** Two rhetorical strategies, vilification and absolutism, pervade the abortion debate and are used by both sides in ways that sustain binaristic thinking. Vanderford notes that vilification occurs when the opposition is attacked (166). In order to gain legitimacy for an argument, individuals and groups often use vilification to condemn the opposition. The pro-choice movement has used analogies to slavery when discussing anti-choice restrictions (Allen 7) while pro-life individuals compare women's health clinics to death camps (Shrange 61). These strategies are used at state levels (Vanderford 167) and on a national scale. Dawn McCaffrey and Jennifer Keys offer a potent example of such strategies: "At demonstrations, pro-life activists paraded disturbing pictures of fetuses aborted by so-called profiteering death merchants. At the same rally, onlookers may witness the pro-choice activists display the image of a bloody metal coat hanger

along with the slogan "Never Again" to counter what they see as zealous, anti-choice extremism" (48). Vilification displays are used by both sides to mobilize and generate support, yet this strategy also sustains the binary between the pro and anti choice abortion movements.

While pro-choice and anti-choice movements function as discursive means to reinforce binaries, clinic escorts are an embodied example of how vilification can sustain the pro-choice and pro-life binary. To help protect women from initially disclosing their identity when traveling into the clinic, most clinics have clinic escorts, or volunteers who walk women and their companions into and out of the clinic, shielding them from protestors. Maloney, a political scientist, argues that escorts work as push back against the protestors. Escorts are seen as a necessary presence in locations where pro-life protestors are present as their very bodies work as a pro-choice argument, a symbol of pro-choice support. More scholarship is needed on abortion escorting because their role is relevant not only to the women and their experience at the clinic but also because of their opposition to the pro-life protestors.

A second strategy that sustains the binaries is absolutism. Absolutist techniques refer to something that is framed in absolutist terms and deemed to be right or wrong regardless of the context (McConnel 287). For example, some pro-life activists argue that life begins at conception, thus abortion under any circumstances is morally bankrupt because killing an innocent person is always wrong. The non-profit organization Life quotes doctors who agree that life definitively begins at conception ("Evidence"). By drawing on a doctor's ethos, this example of absolutism functions to persuade an audience that there is no legitimate reason to consider termination. Some argue that absolutist rhetoric has led to physical as well as psychological violence against women choosing abortion as their best option. Headlines such as "Absolutism is

a Losing Strategy" highlight how the pro-life movement bears most of the blame for the impasse in the abortion war (Pettifer 17).

Absolutist techniques are not imited to the pro-life movement. The rhetoric of no compromise in the pro-choice movement is frequently deployed. Sectors of the pro-choice movement argue that we must remain unapologetically pro-choice in order to secure a women's right to choose. Compromise is not possible. For example, compromise on legislation limiting late term abortions may lead to further concessions that may damage a women's right to choose. Absolutism is particularly prevalent when dealing with the emotional issues of abortion. Kimport et. al. explain that: "The highly politicized nature of the abortion debate encourages the minimization or exaggeration of women's emotional difficulties. Abortion rights advocates have avoided focusing on regret, concerned that it could weaken their political position" (103). This type of emotional absolutism is evident in abortion-based online forums. For example, an anonymous individual posted that "if one believes that the unwillingness to compromise is a weakness, then perhaps they have never felt passionately about an ideological [sic] value" ("Birch" 2008). The foundation for absolutist arguments like these is grounded in autonomy. According to Saletan, "Women's autonomy, they argue, must be absolute" (1) because any compromise may lead to women losing the choice surrounding their reproductive decisions. These examples demonstrate how widespread absolutism is within both pro and anti-choice culture.

Conclusions

This review of literature demonstrates the prevalence of multiple binaries embedded within the abortion debate and how those binaries are reproduced by both sides of the pro and anti-choice debate. The foundational binary, that of pro-choice and pro-life, has broad cultural

significance given the amount of power each movement holds to influence cultural and political spheres. The risk, however, is that the idea of "pro-choice" vs "pro-life" creates a false dualism that eliminates nuanced and productive discussions surrounding the complexities of abortion (Crawley et al 229).

A second binary in abortion rhetoric is based on a distinction between the pubic and private spheres and rests on the assumption that women's issues are private and should not be brought into public spaces. This accounts for a majority of experiential narratives by women and the difficulty in finding public spheres where disclosure is acceptable. Vilification is used by both the pro-choice and pro-life movements, each of which names the opposition as the enemy, solidifying that there are only two positions possible. Absolutist rhetoric relies on claims of all or nothing. The pro-life movement believes that the fetus is a life and life should be maintained no matter the circumstances. The pro-choice movement uses language that we must protect the legality of abortion by downplaying the difficulties of the decision. Strategies that sustain such binaries disallow narratives of women who have terminated, especially if they deviate from the absolutist parameters perpetuated by both sides of the debate.

Although current research may speak about women and criticize the hegemony of the choice framework, there is still a lack of critical and diverse narratives of abortion experiences that challenge these binaries. Even when researchers speak to women regarding their experiences, there is difficulty in locating spaces where women narrate their own experiences. Again, this section has not been an exhaustive listing of all locations where narratives have been or could be found. Noting, as I have done above, the narratives that I located are substantial because it demonstrates that, although useful, each experience and my abortion experience is unique. This uniqueness mandates and legitimizes the telling of all stories within scholarship

because each telling is a new window into connecting with an individual different from ourselves and working to complicate monolithic tellings of certain experiences, i.e., abortion.

In my telling, I work to perform and encourage a critical perspective. I am reminded, "it is critical that reproductive advocates develop a framework that does not rest on the pro-choice versus pro-life framework" (Smith 134). Such a complex framework is necessary precisely because I believe that access to abortion is important and choice-rhetoric is failing. I take to heart Jeannie Ludlow's warning that: "women are losing--not only through changes in Supreme Court membership and recent legislation…but also through the gradual decrease of the number of doctors trained or willing to perform abortions and the more rapid loss of public support for abortion rights" (28). It is with this warning in mind and at heart that I write.

A Methodological Frame

I began writing about my abortion two years after the procedure. Although I knew and felt that the writing process itself was therapeutic for me, I drew from and was informed by performance methodologies in writing and staging the show for an audience. These methods are central to an understanding of this study as they guide the performance choices I will examine in the analysis. This section will describe the methods used in the creation of *To Lay Brick*, specifically how and why I used performance methodologies to address my bodily experiences with my abortion. Performance as an embodied method gave me access and language to work through, name, and criticize my abortion experience while performance autoethnography helped me to craft the text through the process of Spry's body, paper, stage.

First, performance is a qualitative method of textual inquiry. "Performance studies is, thus, a type of textual analysis that involves obtaining, analyzing, performing, and writing about texts. This type of research provides a uniquely qualitative perspective for researchers to use in

studying and interpreting texts" (Frey et al 255). Performance worked as a means of qualitative exploration that created a space to explore my own experiences with abortion. Performance allowed me to draw from my own lived experiences, incorporating the body as a valuable text.

The expansion of what constitutes a text in performance encourages a focus on multiple truths and methods of knowledge production. "Performance knowledge offers dialogue rather than definitions, it recognizes subjectivity rather than Truth, and it encourages critique rather than objectivity" (Spry "Performative" 256). The focus on diverse types of knowledge and histories complicates the normative and hegemonic narratives that dominate culture. In the case of *To Lay Brick*, I worked to dismember the master narratives about abortion and insert a critical perspective through performance. Performance encourages the stories of those who have been left out or written out of history with the belief that these can disrupt or even re-write the master narrative (Corey 250). Because, within my research, scholarship lacked a critical and complicated view of abortion from a women's perspective, performance methodology encouraged me to think about why those narratives were lacking and how my own experience differed from the stories I was able to find.

I specifically used performance autoethnography as the core and guiding element of my method. Performance autoethnography brings the expertise of personal narrative, performance praxis, and ethnographic analysis together. It answers the call for integrating the body into scholarship to challenge master narratives (Spry "Performative" 720). There are differing strands of autoethnography; however, I drew from Tami Spry's text *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* as the main resource and guiding theoretical backbone. For Spry, "it is about putting the body on the page, lifting it to the stage, and then understanding that body and paper and stage *are* one another, that there is no purity of text or hierarchy of embodiment"

(*Body* 26). Thus, performance autoethnography in this context is both the process and the product of creating the performance.

I began, as Spry outlines, with my body. Spry describes that, when using performance autoethnography, "the performer concentrates on the body as the site from which the story is generated" (*Body* 47). This type of turning inward allowed me to acknowledge that my body and my abortion were sites of knowledge production worth exploring. According to Fenske: "The body's corporeality is a dramatic and performing process not only made meaningful through discourse (written upon), but also simultaneously actively engaged in its own production (written itself)" (55). Not only did this turning encourage me as a scholar to look, remember, and reflect on my own body, autoethnography also reminded me that "our bodies co-perform meaning" (Spry *Body* 54). We negotiate our identity in relation to and with others. This means that the body extends beyond our corporeal limits; it encompasses others and reflecting on those interactions is central to the ethos of autoethnography. This method "inherently sets up the subject in the context of her own multiple, heterogeneous, unstable identities where "I" is always and already constructed through a variety of "we"" (Spry *Body* 37). Bodies do not exist in a vacuum. The reporting and writing on experiences can create new ways of knowledge, and as Corey reminds, such work can be a subversive method to disrupt dominant discourse (250). There is a relational component to autoethnography, a recognition that we are all connected under and through culture and that our discussions of our experiences implicate ourselves and others.

To begin my writing, the process of transferring the body to the page, autoethnography asked me to be reflexive and to reflect on my self, in relation to culture and others. "The story comes from a critically reflexive location where the autoethnograper seeks to construct a plural

sense of self, a dialectic of copresence with others in the field of study concerning how bodies are read in various contexts of culture and power" (Spry *Body* 20). To be reflexive of your location is to reflect on not only how culture has produced your identity but also how you, through language and representations, influence and replicate culture. Victor Turner describes reflexivity as "a condition in which a socioculutural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings…social structures and other socioculutural components which make up their public 'selves'" (qtd in Spry *Body* 35). Fieldwork for such a task involves being aware and conscious of the cultures you are a part of, your relationship to those cultures, and how you both produce and are produced by systems within culture. Autoethnography, then, is more than a re-telling about an individual experience, although that is part of the process; its purpose is to connect those experiences critically to systems of power and privilege.

This reflexive writing process recognizes that these accounts are always partial, partisan, and problematic (Goodall x). To be an autoethnographer is to accept that memory is always an interpretation of the past; it is never complete. Part of accepting the inability to fully represent the past or an experience is recognizing the limits of language. Like Roxanne Doty, "I am plagued with a deep dissatisfaction about the immense distance between my words and the 'things' these words try to capture and what these words do or do not do" (1018). This dissatisfaction is rooted in the knowledge that language continues to represent bodies within master narratives (Spry *Body* 20). Autoethnography works to critically analyze "the systems of power held in place through language" (Spry *Body* 20). Thus although language may always fail to represent everything, autoethnography scrutinizes the way language upholds power. When

writing *To Lay Brick*, I was still responsible for the ways I constructed and represented others. Spry warns that there are risks to our representations (*Body* 61).

Finally, I moved to the stage. The staging of performance autoethnography is central because as Linda Park-Fuller argues:

> To speak publicly, on stage, of private experience, or to view publicly someone's personal transgressive story, and not the fictional story of a playwright or even a "character," is to rupture traditional theatrical and rhetorical conventions-causing fractures in categories of real and fictional, public and private, authorized and subversive (31).

In transferring what I had written onto the stage, I continued to be reflexive about my representations and worked toward specific performance choices that would accompany the arguments and critical reflections present within my script.

This type of staging allowed an audience to witness my story in direct and visceral ways. It is in performance that "the audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction with the history of their own bodies" (Albright qtd in Spry *Body* 95). The live audience component of *To Lay Brick* mandated that audience members reflect upon their own rhetorical histories. I implicated audience members in my telling. This is, for me, one of the most important aspects of the rhetorical power of performance; live performance simultaneously implicates the audience while revealing how the performer has also been situated. This live aspect is also important for this study as the analysis focuses on how the props and objects I used make rhetorical arguments that aid in implicating the audience.

The process of autoethnography, specifically performance autoethnography as theorized by Tami Spry, encourages a reflective and critical self. For me, autoethnography meant

constantly writing, re-writing, staging, and re-staging while using the tools of reflexivity to understand my place within culture while working to uncover how I used representations. This reflexive process continued until the last minute of the last show night, and continued throughout the writing of this study. In the following section I will describe the general form of the script and key staging choices, before offering a close analysis of the key props I used to make my rhetorical case.

To Lay Brick: A Description

I compiled the script based on memories of my abortion, reflections on interpersonal interactions, examinations of mainstream media, and scholarship that situates those experiences within cultural ideologies. Because few narratives exist from women about the actual procedure, I chose to re-tell my memory of the abortion itself. I focused on my struggle to remain poised and confident in my choice while also reflecting on how suggestions made by my friends and family prior to terminating impacted me. Although it was my choice, that decision felt tainted and influenced by others. My abortion also changed my affective response during social conversations about abortion. The script examined how mundane conversations with friends implicated and influenced me. In what follows, I will give a brief overview of the scenes and general trajectory of the show followed by a more specific discussion of form and goals.

To Lay Brick was composed of nine, separate scenes or sections. Their titles and order are as follows: On Beginnings, On Reconstruction, On Disclosure, On Academia, On Rationality, On Memory, On Naming, On Mirroring, and On Politics. The opening scene, 'On Beginnings,' set up for the audience my underlying assumptions surrounding identity formation: that it is complicated and that identities are constantly in flux or shifting. It is also where I disclosed that I have terminated a pregnancy. The second scene, 'On Reconstruction,' takes

place in the clinic waiting room where I re-construct my memory of the day I had the abortion, reflecting on my emotional state at the time. In the 3rd scene, I explore disclosure as a difficult endeavor and always an incomplete and partial telling.

The energy of the show shifts in scene 4, 'On Academia,' when I relay a review I received to an abortion script I had submitted to the National Communication Association. The reviewer wrote that the topic did not need a new audience. In this scene I question what that new audience would like and note that, for me, every audience needs to hear real and diverse narratives about women's experiences on a topic such as abortion. In the scene, 'On Rationality,' I use my experience with college debate as a metaphor for how we are taught in society to map out our options when confronted with a decision, to find evidence, and to weigh our options. The difficulty with my abortion was that this was not a framework I could or wanted to follow. Such a rational approach or structure does not acknowledge that these decisions are complicated, messy, and do not follow a pre-determined method of assessment.

The next two scenes deal with issues of memory and naming as rhetorical practices. In 'On Memory,' I outline how difficult memory recall can be and also the particular difficulties in writing down a memory. I was at a loss for words when writing the script because of the difficulty remembering and the difficulty in naming those memories using the cultural labels to which I had access. I reflect on this challenge in the scene 'On Naming' in which I question how we name practices and what expectations are carried by those names. I focus on a moment where I overtly confront a friend at a crowded party after she stated, "I am pro-choice but I still think abortion is murder." In response, I demanded that she call me a murderer to my face. "Murderer" is a charged and significant name and demonstrates the prevalence of vilification

that takes place within discussions of abortion. Even some who are pro-choice still see the decision as one to be disparaged and condemned.

The scene 'On Mirroring' describes and critiques clinic escorting. I had volunteered to be an escort and attended a mandatory training session in the spring of 2011. "Escort volunteers ensure that patients endure minimal harassment [sic] from protesters and are a friendly presence on an otherwise difficult day" ("Get Involved"). This scene challenges such training, making connections to larger rhetorical structures that place limits on what pro-choice activism means. For example, I state: "It's about the language game, the body talk, the aesthetics of a binary. An escort is an embodied robotic, rhetorical imprint of abortion rhetoric, how we're trained, taught, and scripted to interact." This speaks to the larger goal of the show that works to locate and complicate the way binaries work within the abortion debate.

Finally, the concluding scene, 'On Politics,' highlights the tensions within the pro-choice movement itself, using a political leader's discourse as example. Representative Jackie Speier, a congresswoman from California, disclosed on the floor of the House of Representatives in a 2011 debate on Planned Parenthood that she had terminated a pregnancy. I question her particular language choices, such as using baby as the noun, outlining her pregnancy as wanted, and being clear that the abortion was due to health risks. These choices can solidify certain stereotypes surrounding abortion. Her word choices showed how abortion is deemed as more acceptable if it was a wanted pregnancy in which the loss of a baby is related to health issues. This final scene questions how even pro-choice leaders, through rhetorical strategies that perpetuate stereotypes, can still participate in the larger cultural assumptions surrounding abortion.

I used several compositional and thematic strategies to construct the script. For example, I used fragments as a strategy of re-telling my experiences instead of a normative or chronological plot structure. I borrow from Tami Spry who argues that: "this [autoethnographic] writing method is not linear, but rather circular, back-and-forth, fragmented" (*Body* 127). *To Lay Brick* is composed of fragmented narratives that disrupt linearity. Some sections are told in the present tense, some in the past; some details are told in more concrete language while others remain abstract. I use fragmented narratives for a few reasons. Mainly, I hope that the use of a fragmented voice told through shifting verb tenses will help highlight how my contradictory emotions have inhabited my body at various times. My experience is not simple. It is not clean cut. As Catherine Newman describes, "While my politics have been rational intentionally, and coherently pro-choice, my feelings—oh, my feelings have been a kite in the wind" (107). I connect intimately to the "kite in the wind" metaphor as it describes eloquently the ups, downs, in-betweens, and indescribable forms of emotion that have inhabited my body post-abortion. Using multiple voices, forms, and verb tenses is my attempt within the script to display such windy affect.

Fragments also speak to a second issue addressed in the show, the privileging of rationality. Rationality is a central component in modernism (Kuçuradi 12) that relies on a prescriptive problem-solution model. Although differing in their application of "rationality," both the pro-choice and pro-life movements utilize rational argument to determine when life begins, what privacy means, and the role of the state. The show works to complicate this problem solving logic through personal narrative. It answers Rosenbaum's call that "the web of thought about abortion must expand to include a variety of perspectives that are usually overlooked in the customary rhetoric of conversations about "pro-life" or "pro-choice"

alternatives" (708). I accept that my perspective may fall outside of rational argument construction and what "counts" as good evidence in the abortion debate.

Finally, my script explores the shifting and every-present struggle to disclose. I map my shifting and changing willingness to disclose when confronted with reductive and binaristic language within friendships, partnerships, media, and social interaction. Part of this marking is also in the struggle to have voice and the risks in publicly marking my experiences and finding that voice. My difficulty with disclosure is closely connected to my struggle to find language. This particular struggle, in conjunction with my aesthetic of fragments, fueled the performance choice to use props as a central modality of argumentation.

The arguments and thematic through-lines of the show are connected directly to the props that I used. Although few props were present on stage, the objects added to the overall argument of the show and were themselves artifacts. What the objects were and how I used and moved them on the stage are rhetorical; they communicated something to the audience, making their analysis important. In the following section I analyze the rhetorical implications and arguments in the use of my three key props: bricks, projection screens, and chalk writing on the stage.

Objects Exposed

I enter the analysis section of this research report by reflecting on Elyse Pineau's warning that, "Critical discourse about our productions—what we learned and how we came to learn it—often remain as ephemeral as the productions themselves" (44-5). I hope to create a critical discourse around and through *To Lay Brick,* not by writing up a production report, but by reflecting on my choices and use of each prop and how my decisions are grounded in performance and rhetorical theories. I also hope that focusing on how the core props and objects speak to larger cultural critiques inherent in the show can work as a useful model for future

research. These reflections, then, are reflections on purposeful decisions made within the rehearsal process, as well as insights gained through performing with these objects and the post-performance analysis of the rhetorical significance of them. Here, I drew from Tami Spry's methodology of performative autoethnography to reflect on how the writing and staging processes create meaningful arguments. This section analyses those decisions, specifically though Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which I use to reflect on the materiality of the discourses I worked to confront through the staging of *To Lay Brick*. I continually learn from the objects I used on stage and the following analysis displays that educational process.

The Bricks

The placement of bricks on the stage was an important rhetorical through-line across the show. I placed approximately sixty concrete bricks at four locations on stage through the duration of the performance. The majority of their movement was based on me circulating the bricks between four piles. Specifically, I would move them from one pile upstage left to downstage right or from upstage left to downstage left, etc. In some segments I chose not to move the bricks at all. The piles of bricks were metaphors used to question the power of language as it relates to pro-choice rhetoric and my body, along with meaningful insights surrounding performance generally.

To begin, the bricks were a metaphor for language and discourse. Because rhetoric is constitutive, the bricks became a physical manifestation of pro-choice rhetoric, the materiality of that rhetoric and the weight of it playing out on my body. Judith Butler reminds that: "discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood" (qtd in Meijer and Prins 282). I demonstrated this when moving the bricks from pile to pile as a way of aging my physical body by carrying the weight of discourses, in this case,

abortion rhetoric. I also moved the bricks during specific statements such as “I am pro-choice but would never make the choice” and “I would advise my friend not to have an abortion.” The movement of the bricks reflects the weight I felt from these rhetoric rhetorical acts that worked to implicitly judge my decision.

I wanted the repetitious movement of the bricks to evoke Butler’s theory of performativity as well. For Butler, performativity rests on the assumption that ritualized repetitions and citations constitute identities and form subject positions (A.M. Smith 391). As Butler outlines, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies* 3). This means that ‘performatives’ sustain certain norms and rituals within society given their repetitious use and constitutive nature. Gender is the primary example used by Butler and others who deploy her, since being seen as a specific gender and performing to fill those gender expectations are only possible through performatives, the repetitious reminder of what it means to be a girl or boy. Extending this theory into the pro-choice movement, an application shows that through performatives from leading pro-choice affiliates and politicians, a body learns what the expected behavior is leading up to and following an abortion. For me, this meant that if I chose to disclosure about my abortion, I must portray that decision as a confident choice. The appearance of any doubt could lead to potential gains by the opposition.

Performativity allows a contextualized understanding of how constitutive, repetitious acts formulate over time and space. In the show, the sheer number of bricks speaks to the privileging of dominant forms of abortion rhetoric and their power to create realities. In this way, I used the bricks to stage the performative history of the pro-choice movement. Moving the bricks from pile to pile represented my attempt to make sense of the performatives I was given, to make

sense of those histories and to convey how the performatives have influenced my behaviors. Since discourse is so central to the body and performativity and rhetoric create dominant realities, I worked hard to move those rhetorics (the brick) from pile to pile to try to create new realities from the only rhetoric I had access to.

My movement of the bricks acknowledged the mobility of language and the instability of discourse. This is based on an understanding that "performativity ...is the result of an illusion sustained by the incessant replication of norms" (Hey 441). When I moved the bricks randomly to and from divergent places on stage, I was showing that the bricks are moveable and new structures *can* be formed. It was to break the illusion that once the bricks were laid--once language creates realities-- nothing new can come to fruition. I chose not to create a final structure to suggest that I was unable to do so alone. The new discursive structure surrounding abortion will take time, but it is still possible. Finally, my continued movement was an endorsement of an attitude of ongoing questioning since the repetitious movement staged the necessity to acknowledge both how language creates realities and how those realities can never be stable and finished.

Butler's understanding of the physical matter of performativity is helpful in understanding how the staging of the bricks made a rhetorical argument. She argues:

> What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as *a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*. That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power (*Bodies* 9-10).

The bricks represented such matter. They were simultaneously material and metaphorical matter that stood in for the matter of my body as it is performatively constituted in language. The metaphor both represented the performative as well as the effect such a performative produces. In this case, the bricks stood for the pro-choice rhetoric and wider abortion discourses that constitute the formation of subjects, in this case, my female subjectivity. I underscored this by speaking "I would never make the choice" while moving the bricks. These phrases spoke to the normative assumptions (Butler *Bodies* 10), even within the pro-choice movement, that abortion should be avoided. In turn, these performatives created the walls, barriers, and the bricks that shape how a female body can physically move within the world.

My staging of the bricks links closely to discussions of systems and the placement of power within those systems. Sixty bricks were used and placed in four different locations. The sheer number of bricks was an attempt to portray the connections between multiple discourses and how they both sustain and are sustained by different power structures and systems. My moving of the bricks represented the way systems are constructed, connected, alterable, and material. Although the show discussed the rhetoric and institutions that surround abortion and pro-choice rhetoric, the bricks dually represented the inability to escape systems. As a performance technique, this worked to create a deeper and more critical understanding of how we intersect with larger sociological privileges (Spry *Bodies* 51).

The bricks also represented my inability to escape language. As a rhetorician and an autoethnographic performer, the task of identifying larger systems is core to most of my research; however, I struggled to find words to place my experience. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook reminds me that what haunts discourse is that it is both "always already incoherent, incommensurate, indeterminate, and yet also productive, heuristic, and provisionally orienting at

the same time" (301). The bricks were the metaphor that represented my running back to language and reliance on simple linguistic structures to describe untellable stories and their affect. The bricks demonstrated that language will always, at certain times, weigh on us and weigh us down but through material action such as carrying and restarting, we can change. Using the bricks was just one of three main performance choices. Below I examine and analyze the use of projection screens.

The Projection Screens

A second staging choice I wish to address was the presence of two large screens with performers moving in silhouette while behind them. I placed the screens on each side of the stage and the screens were large enough for the performers to stand behind them without their actual bodies being visible to the audience. The screens were hung from above at the same length and width; both were white in appearance and backlit. This technical effect meant that when the actors stood directly behind the lit screen, their silhouette could be seen clearly by the audience, while if the actors stepped farther back from the screen, they would be unseen. One performer stood behind each screen for the duration of the performance, moving in diverse ways throughout sections and, at times, speaking. In this way, they never represented static characters and were, with one exception, never named. They also never moved from behind the screen, meaning that their bodies were never fully revealed to the audience. Their presence on the stage is linked to my questions surrounding the fluidity of identity formation. The screens represented both reflections and memories of myself, but they also represented others with whom I have come into contact and the language that has influenced me.

A primary purpose of the screens was to complicate the idea of stable identities. Thus, it is important to articulate what bodies those individuals standing behind the screen may represent.

On a simple level, the two ghost like bodies were extensions of myself at different times and spaces within memory. Their movement reflects my own movement as I age and become more reflexive of my experience with abortion. In one scene, for example, the two bodies slowly move in circles, signifying my own entrapment within circular thinking or my failure to make sense of my abortion. At other times, their circling showed my confidence in speaking about the issue. Similarly, in a separate scene, the bodies moved forward and backward in a line, allowing audience members to see them only when they walked close to the screen. This movement embodies how my memory of abortion works in mundane practices. At times it is out of sight and out of mind, however, not for long. Certain images or language will trigger the memory again, however foggy, and I am reminded of terminating and all its implications.

This staging evokes for me performance artist Denise Uyehara, who works to explore how memory marks the body. Uyehara probes how "our memories warp with time and how the use of lighting can represent those memories" (qtd in Katrak 251). By using lit screens to create silhouettes, I was attempting to display the complicated narratives of those memories. The bodies were an extension of parts of my identity, parts that I love and simultaneously, parts that I hate. It was also a representation of parts that are no longer with me, physically, such as the cells that were eliminated during my abortion, and how, although I am the same body, I have changed as a person.

The screens and silhouetted bodies allowed me to explore and stage themes. If the screens were partially an extension of myself, they were then partially a representation of my body during the abortion, as well as the memory of my body in that space. Given the nature of performativity and its connection to materiality, there is no way to "escape" that particular time and space. The staging of the memory underscored how our identity is continuously

reconstructed via our past experiences, while also showing that within each self there are multiple identities and relationships to the remembering self. By staging a memory of myself, as well as extensions of my current self via the screens, I sought to stage memory as simultaneously relegated to my private past while also impacting my current public expression of self.

The screens displayed the fluidity of identity and potential for identity boundary crossing. If the bricks represented the attempt to create identity boundaries through discourse and to create names to stabilize those, the screens were an example of what Butler calls an "empty signifier." For Butler, any name is unable to fully describe that which it names (*Bodies* 191). The screens were like empty signifiers because they were unnamable, or rather, they were the space in between names and identities. Simultaneously, they were mobile and fluid like my shifting, multiple identities. In relation to pro-choice rhetoric, the screens worked as an aesthetic counter to the solidity of the bricks and my frustration with being named and statically framed. As a woman, scholar, rhetorician, performance methodologist, sister, daughter, liberal, writer, and an individual who has had an abortion, what list of names could be accurate in relation to my complex body? Thus I used the screens as an aesthetic and rhetorical choice to display the inability of a single or stable name to track all the details of my own self.

Beyond an extension of myself, the silhouettes also represented memories of other voices in my life, both real and imagined. The bodies were those "others" who, through their language and relation to me, became part of my subject formation, part of "I." The bodies behind the screens displayed how I was shaped and re-shaped by my relational encounters with others. Through interaction and through discourse, those unnamed others became part of me. Ultimately, I used the bodies behind the screens to represent how my subject formation, my self, was continually in flux as per others and their influence on me via discourse. However, this was

juxtaposed to the stable screens that placed parameters on where those hidden bodies could go. They were stuck behind the screen, staged to identify the boundaries of the screen as impermeable. In this way, the boundaries represented how, although the self is always in flux and being changed by others, it is also limited and guided via the boundaries of language and what representations a self has access to. Language influenced how my self became formed and, through performativity, I learned what that self was suppose to look like and act.

The tensions of sustaining the borders of identity while attempting to move beyond such boundaries was exemplified in the staging of two screens and two bodies. Specifically, the two screens were there to represent the constructed binary inherent within the abortion debate: pro-choice or anti-choice. This strict binary was juxtaposed to the ambiguous and shifting bodies behind the screen, demonstrating the fluid nature of bodies as they move in and out of these roles and discourse. Overall, the screens worked to complicate how identity functions, the way identity is constructed, and how fluid the self really is despite cultural attempts to create stability through binary identity markers. Binaristic thinking, the main critique of the show and of this study, will be discussed by looking at the final prop, the chalk writings on the stage.

The Writing on the Stage

The last staging strategy I will analyze was my choice to write on the stage in chalk. The show began on a blank black stage. Throughout the show, I used chalk of assorted colors to write words and other lines/symbols on the stage. At times, the writing would reflect and replicate words I actually spoke while at other times, I used more symbolic and abstract writing. I was also barefoot which meant that my chalky footprints eventually covered parts of the stage floor. My footprints turned the stage into a separate piece of art. It is also worth noting that although there were standard words and lines that I drew, each night also included impromptu writing. In

the following I section will look at: (a) the use of chalk itself as a messy prop and as mess, (b) the written words on the stage, and (c), the use of lines. Specifically, I used these staging devices to think through issues of ephemerality, the public/private distinction, disclosure, and transgression.

Chalk was not my first choice. In fact, I did not have a writing device in mind when I walked into my first rehearsal with director Rick Jones, although I knew that lines on the stage were an important component. This strategy was developed within the rehearsal process. Initially, we toyed with a few potential options to create the lines, namely paint or tape. The difficulty, however, in the use of those options would be their semi-permanence. I soon settled on chalk. The chalk turned into the performance component that helped me, as a performer, work through a long time argument in performance studies.

Performane is ephemeral. Peggy Phelan addressed the notion of ephemerality by stating that "Performance…becomes itself through disappearing" (qtd in Powell & Stephenson Shaffer 6). A main component of performance then, according to Phelan, is its ephemeral core; the ability to never be anything twice, a live performance that evaporates post-viewing. It exists only once, a temporal moment shared by audience members and performers, then gone (Ehmke 6). As Pineau argues,"production work leaves little or no lasting record. Sets are struck, costumes dismantled, cast and crew are dispersed and directors turn to other academic or administrative responsibilities" (44). Although new types of recording performances have emerged, ephemerality is still a commonly cited aspect of performance work. This seems to be part of the charm and the challenge of performance, the uniqueness of a show and the privilege of an audience member to witness the event.

Many artists and scholars, myself included, struggle with embracing peformance as wholly ephemeral. The paradox of ephemerality is that, although we want performance to be unique, we also want performance (at times) to be activist work with lasting effects, which can be difficult if a performance is only seen once by a limited audience. My understanding of ephemerality as a performance paradox comes from my rhetorical roots and played out as a foundational element for the show. I believe in performance of the everyday just as I believe in the influence of mundane rhetorical acts. At times, I feel the ephemerality argument privileges a certain type of staged performance. For me, a primary goal of my show was to highlight how mundane rhetorical acts like every day performances are influential in their mere utterance. Performance may be partially ephemeral, but the things said on stage matter performatively. The sound may have disappeared, however, the remninsce of that language on certain bodies does not.

What does this mean in relation to the chalk? The chalk was my middle ground as it relates to the arguments of the ephemerality of performance. It is how I worked through my struggle. I now can "make sense" of the chalk and, in turn, "make sense" of the ephemeral components of *To Lay Brick*. This sense making was embedded in the messiness of the chalk as metaphor and the residual dust that is left on stage after the show.

There is no question that chalk can be messy. It does not dry like paint. When walking over the chalk dust attached to my bare feet, leaving imprints on the stage floor. Writing with chalk meant residue stayed on my hands and clothing as well. Performance is similarly messy. Paul Stapleton elaborates:

> Performance can also be valued for its clarity of articulation, its ability to veraciously demonstrate where descriptive communication falters; but even in this instance the goal is

> not to provide clear and reproducible data or rational arguments (other disciplines are better suited for these tasks); rather performance is able to confront one with the full realm of human modes of experience at its disposal, alive in its contingency and messiness even when the performing artist's intention is clear (3).

The messiness inherent in performance was thus shown through the messy use of the chalk. Although I was able to physically write recognizable words on the stage or create mainstream symbols (like a dollar sign), walking over these words smudged and blurred the writing. My feet and clothes became dirty.

This messy component of chalk was central to my argument about ephemerality. I had to work very hard to get rid of the risidual dust left after the performance both on stage and on my clothing. Just like live performance, when I left the Marion Kleinau Theatre, the performance may have ended and the stage was cleaned but I took the residue with me. It was in my hair, my clothes, and under my nails; the smell of chalk stayed in my nostrils. In this way, after leaving a performance, the stage may be cleaned but we still take *something* material with us.

A second significant theme when analyzing the chalk was the actual writing or text that I put on the stage. I chose certain words that I used every night, however others were highly improvised and chosen in the moment of live performance. Given the amount written on the stage and the shifting text written, I will isolate two specific sections of writing that were consistently used: the writing of "words, words, words" and the word "privacy."

I wrote: "words, words, words" while speaking the following: "I wish I was more visual, more artistic, but words are all I have, all I have is an outline, all I do is rhetoric. My mind is working in words." This action communicated both the love and the frustration I felt when attempting to put words to an experience. As I have argued, I found myself, post-abortion,

feeling that mainstream abortion stories were not reflecting my experience. I struggled with finding the words to describe how I was feeling and what I had experienced.

This frustration and, in turn, the writing of "words, words, words" was my attempt to inhabit the space on stage between language and body and between performance and rhetoric. As Tami Spy reminds, "writing performative autoethnography is about developing one's relationship with words; it is about developing an acute awareness of the implications that language is the only thing we have between us to express the complexity of our thoughts and experience" (*Body* 99). Roxanne Doty eloquently elaborates this struggle:

> I am plagued with a deep dissatisfaction about the immense distance between my words and the 'things' these words try to capture and what these words do or do not do. I have struggled with how to have a presence in my own writing, not necessarily to learn about myself but without such a presence I do not think it is possible to connect with the human beings at the centre of what I write about (1048).

The use of chalk and the writing of "words, words, words" described the tension I experienced as a rhetorical and performance scholar between studying communication, both verbal and nonverbal, while displaying the tension of the messy, shifting, and disappearing nature of that language and communication.

A second text written on the stage was the world "privacy." The issue of "privacy" is central to the issue of reproductive rights. I make this explicit in the script: "A substantial chunk of the pro-choice rhetoric surrounds the question of privacy. A women's body, her decisions surrounding that flesh and the decisions surrounding sex and children should be private. In fact, that privacy is protected under the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling." While I spoke, a blank section of

the stage was chosen and the word "privacy" was written and underlined. I wanted to highlight the public/private distinction that haunts the abortion debate and what this distinction may mean for larger social issues.

As elaborated earlier, there are consequences for reproductive rights when the public/private distinction is upheld. To push issues of reproduction and specifically abortion into the private sphere denies that: "reproductive rights are the place where many of the crucial forces shaping and changing women's lives…intersect. They are the ground on which major battles about women's status are being fought" (Goldberg 11). The framing of abortion as a private issue has permitted courts to withdraw funds, specifically from poor women (Dean 392). If an issue is relegated to the private sphere, it is seen as less worthy of public funds and something to be negotiated within the household, out of sight from government funding and oversight. Writing the word "privacy" on the stage marked the significance and consequence of such a distinction within the abortion movement.

Privacy was also significant in my own journey of disclosure and my continued anxiety to talk publicly about my abortion. Privacy highlights the constant struggle of whether to disclose or keep quiet. For example, one colleague warned me to prepare for protestors outside of my show. A family member asked if I had received any hate mail from anti-choice individuals. Although neither occurred, these examples are part of my struggle with the public risk and consequence of disclosure. I constantly felt the tension between the transformative nature of performing about my abortion, and the risk that the news of my performance could reach family members who are anti-choice and firmly believe in the right to life.

In conjunction with the word "privacy," I also drew lines on the stage to represent the public/private binary, specifically drawing attention to spaces that women are "allowed" to speak

in relation to their abortion and places where that disclosure is prohibited. Christine Garlough highlights this distinction when observing that "experiences have left me with a profound appreciation for both the difficulty of the issue and the courage it requires to speak of it publicly, putting one's own self potentially at risk in front of crowds of unknown others who may not share the ultimately political perspective being advanced" (369). The courage needed to speak highlights the consequences when women's bodies are relegated to private spaces.

I identified other false binaries through drawing lines across the stage. Early in the performance, a line was drawn horizontally downstage that solidified the border between audience seating and the stage. Although the stage was implicitly marked as a separate space, the chalk line both reinforced and reminded the audience that they were separate from the performer and stage. While I drew a line, I discussed my first performance on abortion experience that took place on that very Kleinau stage. This led to a reflection of why I found the stage a safe space to disclose my abortion, while in other spaces I stay silent, in accordance with the dominant performative expectation. In this line drawing, I highlighted the inherent binary constructed within culture, differentiating the stage and the audience. As I say in the script, "we always draw lines between who is on stage and who is in the audience." I felt safe on the stage and felt safe to mark that difference because it was a space that has been marked for me as safe, or rather, safer than other spaces to speak.

Although the stage was a safe space for me, it was still a public space. The Kleinau Theatre was a public space where colleagues, faculty, students, strangers, and family alike were invited to witness my performance. My very presence in a public space, discussing my abortion complicated the public/private divide. Autoethnographic performance shifts the logic of what bodies belong in what spaces and in what temporal contexts. The performance of "aborter," or

for some, "murderer," troubled the dichotomy of public and private, shedding light on the traditional conception of morality as it relates to womanhood and the female body.

I further troubled the public/private binary by purposefully blurring the chalk lines. Late in the performance, I took my foot and blurred the lines that were drawn while stating: "Bodies aren't private. Motherhood isn't private. Bodies are political. The line is always blurred." The blurring of the line was significant as it embodies Christine Harold's notion of transgression. She outlines transgression as "a constant engagement with boundaries (for example, political, sexual, historical boundaries), an engagement that serves to destabilize what might otherwise appear to be stable, monolithic, epistemological, or ontological structures" ("Tracking Heroin" 876). Blurring the chalk lines was that type of engagement. It recognizes that the project of eliminating the boundaries that outline hegemonic structures are futile and at times, irresponsible. A blurring is a pushing back, even a small push at the binaries, categories and boxes that have performatively defined my existence post-abortion.

The blurring also represented my blurred sense of self, the response to societal attempts at a stabilized rhetoric that describes a pro-choice woman or the pro-choice movement: be it that no "confession" of an abortion should be spoken, that you must be absolute in your decision, or generally what language you use to identify your allegiance to one side of the abortion debate (Cannold xxiii). It represented that I exist in the blurred spaces of the line. It was a refusal to accept the normative discourses given to me by culture and embody the complicated messiness that constitute a "self."

Ultimately, I re-created the line at the end of the show. This particular section of the performance focuses on a Democratic congresswoman, Jackie Speier. Speier testified on the floor of the House of Representatives and disclosed that she had endured an abortion. Initially, it

seemed that Speier attempted to publicly disclose her experience with abortion by blurring the public/private distinction through disclosing in a public, legislative space. Her rhetoric, however, implicitly reinforced privacy and the need to keep these stories out of public spaces. Speier never used the word abortion, even as she conceded that she had lost a "child" and that the pregnancy was wanted. Speier quickly shifted her testimony to one of economics after her initial disclosure. Although courageous, I saw this testimony as a subtle example of how the boundary between the public and private is sustained within pro-choice rhetoric. Because Speier had intended to carry the child to term and suffered a loss post-procedure, her experience was deemed suitable for the public. However, women like myself, who found themselves with an unwanted pregnancy, where carrying to term was never an option, are stigmatized and encouraged to keep this experience private. The re-drawing of the blurred line signifies the power that still resides in pushing women into the private.

Finally, I straddled one of the lines I had created. This particular section questioned the political rhetoric that continues to draw lines and create boundaries between pro-choice and anti-choice individuals such that it seems impossible to frame abortion in other ways. These ideologies exist through their rearticulation (Butler *Bodies* 193). The hegemony inherent within these ideologies led me to straddle the line, the blurred line, as a confused woman who was still unsure of the answers. This straddling was a moment of degrounding in Judith Butler's sense: "I think we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing; or when we've produced an aesthetic practice that shakes the ground. That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms" (qtd in Osbourne and Segal). I was, through

this aesthetic choice, embodying my degrounding and admitting that I am always standing in too many places at once while not knowing where I am at all.

Conclusion

The devising, writing, and performing of *To Lay Brick* arose from my faith in the profound efficacy of performance autoethnography and my general need as a scholar and a woman who has had an abortion to say something meaningful and reflexive about my experience. I drew upon my pro-choice roots to complicate what pro-choice rhetoric has meant to me and how it may be read on certain bodies that have chosen to terminate. I am not attempting to speak for everyone. I am sure certain bodies feel comfortable living in the world of status quo pro-choice rhetoric and for that, I cannot and do not wish to fault them. For me, however, not only was performance necessary but the study of and analysis of that performance is also worthwhile. This research report has worked to create an argument why props are themselves useful artifacts for performance research by analyzing the bricks, projection screens, and chalk in *To Lay Brick*. The use of these props within my show addressed how binaries are continually sustained within abortion rhetoric.

This research report has attempted to specifically address issue of binaries in abortion rhetoric: what binaries surround abortion and why those binaries should be complicated, specifically through performance. I focused on the binary of pro-choice or anti-choice/pro-life labels, the public/private binary, and the effect of both in public discourse. Understanding binaries is important not only because of their dominance within the larger context of abortion discourse, but also because I have felt personally implicated by their existence. For example, not only did the public/private dichotomy weigh on my decision to write and perform about my abortion, it still weighs on my conscious as I write this research report, knowing this study will

be available and accessible for colleagues and students to read. Also, given the dominance of the pro and anti-choice ideologies, I have had to constantly negotiate if my story and my feelings about my abortion compromise pro-choice arguments that abortion is not emotionally detrimental. I felt and continue to feel "stuck" between the binary of pro-choice and anti-choice, unsure of where I belong or if I want to identify with the prescribed labels.

These reflections of my abortion experience led to the writing and performing of *To Lay Brick,* where I worked to create a new narrative about my abortion. I sought to create a narrative that complicated the dominant and hegemonic scripts that perpetuate American culture about abortion. I used performance autoethnography as my primary method, writing my own story while also weaving in theoretical concepts and relating both the story and the theory to larger cultural issues. Autoethnography asks the performer to be reflexive about how the self relates to culture. *To Lay Brick* told my experiences with abortion while also situating myself culturally within rhetorical structures. Tami Spry's *Body Paper Stage* along with Judith Butler's theory of peformativity were the guiding theoretical and methodological theories I drew from to help process particular staging choices.

With Spry and Butler in mind, I chose to analyze three key props and staging actions as rhetorical strategies: the bricks, the projection screens, and the writing on the stage. Although the script is an important artifact, the props themselves were rhetorical devices and their physical presence on stage, along with the movement of the objects, demonstrates how props are a fruitful ground for rhetorical analysis. I used the bricks, screens, and chalk to work toward disrupting hegemonic and normative discourse surrounding pro-choice rhetoric, specifically as it relates to constructing the binaries of pro/anti choice and the public/private sphere. I locate these binaries

and constructions within the abortion debate to both situate my relationship to them as a woman who has had an abortion as well as to complicate and attempt to disrupt their existence.

The focus on disrupting binaries central to the abortion debate reveals a major limitation of this research report. In order to analyze such binaries, I am constantly affirming them. Butler's reminder that reality is created through the repetitious use of performatives speaks to this dilemma. These binaries within abortion culture are powerful because they are repeated over and over again. My reference to them continues this tradition, potentially reinforcing the very power I wish to eliminate. I am unclear if such a paradox can ever be eliminated, however, I still encourage scholars to highlight and examine how binaries surround abortion and its implications.

I also leave the show and this study with slight hesitation regarding disclosure. I do believe that more complicated and diverse narratives from women who have terminated will begin to interrogate the binaries within the abortion debate; however, I am also aware that there is significant risk to such a task. Endorsing a methodology grounded in performance autoethnography is an endorsement of and trust in individual women who have aborted to make the choice when and where they wish to disclose and narrate their experience, if at all. Given that the topic of abortion is one so entrenched in controversy, there may be personal and professional risks for women who enter public spaces to disclose. Therefore, my implicit call for a diversity in abortion narratives is one I make with caution and trust.

Finally, I strongly encourage more performance work on the implications and limitations of pro-choice rhetoric. As scholars we may feel that abortion is an over-discussed topic, an issue where nothing new can be said. I hope that my voice has spoken in a new and encouraging key. I also hope *To Lay Brick*, both as a performance project and an object of critical analysis in this research report, is a reminder to scholars that at times, the most "over-done" topics are areas

where the least is really being said.

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