

# "Not Even a Hospital": Abortion and Identity Tension in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Cinda Gault, University of Guelph, researches Canadian women writers who came to publishing prominence during the Canadian nationalist and second-wave feminist movements. Recent work compares the representation of maternity and language in the work of Alice Munro and William Faulkner.

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## Abstract

This article challenges established understandings of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* as a portrait of parallel female and national victimization by focusing on recent theorization of the inherently fraught relationship between national and gendered identities. It addresses the conflicted relationship between national purpose and female autonomy.

## Résumé

Cet article défie les accords établis dans le roman *Surfacing* de Margaret Atwood comme le portrait du parallèle de la victimisation nationale et celle de la femme en se concentrant sur la théorisation récente de la relation tendue en soi entre l'identité nationale et l'identité selon le sexe. Il présente le conflit entre l'objectif national et l'autonomie de la femme.

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The 1960s and 1970s saw a period of intense and renewed interest in identity formation among Canadians and women in particular that, in turn, fuelled political decisions that would reframe the experience of being female and/or Canadian. Legislation, both at that time and later, tracked changes in public opinion about such wide-ranging issues as divorce, family law, equality, sexual assault, abortion, and domestic violence. As women entered non-traditional environments, they raised questions and challenged assumptions about who women were and what they could do. At the same time, national initiatives throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and later were designed to culminate in the federal government's goal to "bring home" the Canadian Constitution and commit its citizens to values that would govern collective national action. Fundamental issues included the relationship of the nation to its colonial history, the provinces to each other, and the provinces and territories to their central government. As female and national interests came to the forefront, questions of identity and self-definition became relevant not only within the social and political worlds of the time, but also within the realm of literary production, and continued to affect understandings of female and national identity afterward.

Like other writers of her generation, Margaret Atwood tackled previously taboo subjects that by the 1970s had begun to engage public attention: "Things that were not openly discussed. Abortion. Incest. Lesbians. Masturbation. Female Orgasm. Menopause. Impotence. Anger" (Atwood 1990, 15). The issue of abortion is the cornerstone of her 1972 novel, *Surfacing*. Its plot centres on an abortion that has, since the novel's publication, been read by critics as symbolic on two levels. First, the protagonist is a woman pressured into an abortion she

does not want, and second she is a Canadian in despair as she watches her country being drained of its life's blood by technology and pollution, by-products of American economic imperialism. One critic typically observed that the abortion represents "a collective violation that the narrator relates to the 'American' way of life and that stems from human intervention into the natural order, a system abuse macrocosmically paralleling the narrator's individual victimization as a woman" (Granofsky 1990, 54). Today, in light of twenty-first-century globalization and new challenges to reproductive autonomy by a right-wing revival in the United States, a reconsideration of the abortion issue in Atwood's novel is timely. In particular, this paper challenges the longstanding assumption that *Surfacing's* narrator is best understood as incorporating parallel victimizations of gender and national identities.

Since the 1970s, many critics have emphasized this theme of parallel female and national experience in *Surfacing*. In 1976, Carol Christ connected the female body and Canadian wilderness through violation: "Unable to come to terms with this violation of her self and her body, [the narrator] focuses her attention on the violation of the Canadian wilderness by the men she calls 'Americans'" (Christ 1976, 320). Similarly, W.H. New noted a link "between the femaleness of the central character and the dilemma of the nation in which she lives" (New 1976, 273). Sherrill Grace noted in 1983 that "[c]ertain of [Atwood's] works have been adopted by nationalists in Canada" and "by feminists in the United States" (Grace 1983, 4). Finally, in 1990, Clara Thomas drew the same parallel connection between women and Canadians in the historical world: "[e]very woman's struggle of the psyche to know, be and act as and for herself is a paradigm of the situation Canadians feel themselves to be in" (Thomas 1990, 3).

More contemporary critics continue to view Atwood's female and national identities as parallel or paradigmatic of each other. In 1993, Sandra Tomc suggested that *Surfacing* "overtly identified the 'rape' of

the Canadian wilderness by American investors and tourists with the abuse of the female body by men" (Tomc 1993, 74). She also claimed that Atwood's later novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a departure from an earlier tendency to consider feminist issues and Canadian culture together, positing that Atwood's "collapse of national and gender categories would, under any circumstances, make a consideration of her nationalism relevant to her feminist readings of contemporary culture" (1993, 74). Sandra Djwa observed in 2000 "[t]his tendency to victimization Atwood associates both with Canada and the 1960s female personality" (Djwa 2000, 176). Three years later, Erinc Özdemir argued that "the national and gender dimensions of the issue of victimhood converge in the female Canadian identity of the protagonist...[in that] the Canadian nation...[and] the female body emerge as entities to be taken possession of from within by resisting colonization by power structures that threaten them with engulfment and amputation" (Özdemir 2003, 62).

While the conventional reading is perfectly valid, a rethinking of the role of abortion in this novel is nevertheless due for a number of reasons. Recent theorization about the fraught relationship between gendered and national identities advises that parallel experience is unlikely, since national identities tend to subsume and contain gendered ones. As Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens put it, "[m]ale control of women's sexuality and reproductive capacities is often an integral part of nationalism" (Charles and Hintjens 1997, 8). Also, the concept of parallel identities implies specific and predictable characteristics as a basis by which to compare. Yet, as Maureen Devine observes about *Surfacing*, "there's certainly the tentative acknowledgement that the landscape is out of balance" (Devine 1992, 134), and that "conceptualizing gender is a continual process" (1992, 157). If the underpinnings of these identities are changing or out of balance, what are the chances of their being parallel or paradigmatic for any length of time or at any given time? Atwood's female and national portrayals undoubtedly gesture

toward each other, but moments when these identities actually conflict can be seen as revealing a resistance to things parallel, paradigmatic, or collapsible. Not only does the abortion represent a diminishment of the narrator's choices as a woman because of her nationality, but, as will be discussed later, the very memory of the abortion is prompted by a misperception of national identity.

By questioning the meaning of the abortion from an historical socio-political perspective, readers can confront the tendency for things female to disappear into things national. Power differentials between Canadian women and men, with respect both to gender issues and those of national identity, are not adequately addressed by criticism that emphasizes parallel identity constructions. As a result, the novel's subtlest commentary on the limits of choice for Canadian women at that time is obscured. R. Radhakrishnan's torrent of questions as to why national and gendered politics tend to conflict can inspire fresh insights into the novel:

Why is it that the advent of the politics of nationalism signals the subordination if not the demise of women's politics? Why does the politics of the "one" typically overwhelm the politics of the "other"? Why could the two not be coordinated within an equal and dialogic relationship of mutual accountability?...Why is it that nationalism achieves the ideological effect of an inclusive and putatively macropolitical discourse, whereas the women's question - unable to achieve its own autonomous macropolitical identity - remains ghettoized within its specific and regional space? (Radhakrishnan 1992, 78)

The most obvious reason for questioning the meaning of the abortion in *Surfacing* is the fact that the abortion is illegal. Canada implicitly operates as a libidinally invested national force because it is represented as a nation that denies the protagonist her

reproductive autonomy. Atwood's description of the narrator's illegal abortion buttresses feminist outrage at the time on behalf of women who had to endure dangerous conditions in managing their own bodies:

Not even a hospital, not even that sanction of legality, official procedures. A house it was, shabby front room with magazines, purple runner on the hall floor, vines and blossoms, the smell of lemon polish, furtive doors and whispers, they wanted you out fast. Pretense of the non-nurse, her armpits acid, face powdered with solicitude. Stumble along the hall, from flower to flower, her criminal hand on my elbow, other arm against the wall. (Atwood 1972, 148)

This representation of a furtive backroom setting for the abortion echoes the kind of story that *Chatelaine* magazine brought to light in 1970, two years before *Surfacing's* publication. The story featured a reader survey of opinions on abortion. In it, editor Doris Anderson lamented the survey results and documented the costs to women who, under Canadian law, were not permitted control over their reproductive capacities:<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds scribbled their story in the margins of the questionnaire or added letters. We were frankly appalled by the heartache, torment and misery poured out: by women who had to go to butchers for the abortions they couldn't get legally but were determined to obtain; by women who, unable to terminate the pregnancy, have resented the child ultimately born; by women worn out by six and more children, who bitterly feel their lives have been stunted and spoiled because they knew no way to avoid becoming little more than caretakers to a host of other human beings; by women whose every sex experience with their husbands

is a nightmare fear of resulting pregnancy. (Gillen 1971, 68)

Despite the narrator's personal dilemma in *Surfacing* as to whether or not she wants the abortion, she is positioned in the novel's setting as a criminal. The procedure she will undergo as a woman is officially denied to her as a citizen. Abortion laws that are set by the nation and designed to interfere with female reproductive autonomy confound the notion that the protagonist is similarly victimized as a woman and citizen. Judith Plaskow observes that "[d]espite the fact that the heroine is ambivalent toward the child's father, that she does not choose the abortion, and that the book as a whole clearly acknowledges death and killing as parts of the natural cycle, Atwood will not differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate abortions" (Plaskow 1976, 337). In a society where women have sexual and reproductive autonomy, this protagonist would not have had to face such a distinction. Without discounting the controversy attached to medical and moral concerns of human intervention in the natural world, the protagonist's relationship to her own reproductive capacity would exist outside a national moral hierarchy.

Further, in the protagonist's world, what is important to her is not acknowledged or reinforced by anyone. Her identity dilemma is twofold: as a Canadian, she is not allowed to have the abortion she is having; as an individual woman, she does not want the abortion she is being pressured to have. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist is coerced into pregnancy, but the surprise of *Surfacing* is that the protagonist is coerced into an abortion. One effect of this reversal is to place the feminist reader of the times (to whom the novel appealed) in an uncomfortable position. Since the focus of feminist public pressure in the early 1970s was on a woman's right to have an abortion, this protagonist's problem seems at odds with her times. She is less focused on her threatened rights and more concerned

about wanting a baby that is unwanted by the father. Worse, the father wants the abortion in opposition to the narrator's will: "he said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed" (Atwood 1972, 144). Not only does he dismiss her choices, but he also denies the seriousness of the risks she takes, both in committing a crime against the nation and in enduring the personal ramifications the procedure will have on her. The overarching effect of this complication is the isolation the protagonist experiences because her autonomy as a female citizen is denied.

Another source of tension between female and national identities is the opaque message delivered by this somewhat complicated treatment of abortion. Christ observes that while the "possible use of the novel as a right to life tract signals a danger to women in affirming body and nature," we should not "dismiss Atwood's vision as antifeminist." Atwood herself states that she would be "most upset if my book were to be construed as an anti-abortion tract" (Christ 1976, 328-29). The irony of Atwood's abortion story potentially serving anti-abortion political purposes points to the need to assess why the abortion is a sufficiently bad thing to prompt the protagonist to repress memory of it for the first half of the novel. Is the abortion bad from a moral perspective because it is unnatural, from a social power perspective because the protagonist did not want it, or from a national perspective because the nation outlawed it? The protagonist's wish to continue with the pregnancy puts her at odds with her lover as well as with religious and national interests. No matter how it is viewed, the abortion takes place in a society that compromises her ability to meet her own needs as a woman.

The protagonist's experiences of sexual and reproductive coercion are uniquely Canadian. At first, the presumably Canadian married lover appears simply as a self-serving male professor who wants to enjoy his happy home along with his convenient mistress. He refuses to acknowledge what the protagonist recognizes as a more

permeable barrier between public and personal worlds, "[a]ll I had was the criticisms in red pencil he paperclipped to my drawings, Cs and Ds, he was an idealist, he said he didn't want our relationship as he called it to influence his aesthetic judgment. He didn't want our relationship to influence anything; it was to be kept separate from life" (Atwood 1972, 154). Despite his wish for the personal not to be political, however, the married lover thrusts the protagonist into a national political debate that involved women challenging the nation's value system.

At the time of *Surfacing's* publication, both Canadian and American national understandings of abortion were in flux as a result of Dr. Henry Morgentaler's challenges to the Criminal Code in Canada and the *Roe vs. Wade* decision in the United States. Even as the abortion laws changed, the authority to change them rested on an implicit assumption that the nation state had the responsibility and the right to limit a woman's reproductive capacity in the first place.<sup>2</sup> The debate was not about whether or not the nation had any business telling women what they could or could not do with their own reproductive capacities. This authority was assumed by the state, and the focus was the basis on which (and the circumstances in which) the nation would allow such autonomy to occur. As feminists fought abortion laws, they highlighted the inherent instability that haunted (and continues to haunt) the issue of abortion. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias warn of the instability inherent in the overlap of reproductive issues in a national context when women who are "constituted through the state...[are] also often actively engaged in countering state processes" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 11). Sixteen years after the publication of *Surfacing*, the Canadian abortion law was legally identified as an infringement on female autonomy. The gendered and national tensions implicit in Atwood's depiction of her narrator's abortion were explicitly recognized in 1988 when the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Criminal Code section regarding abortion was

unconstitutional. As Alison Prentice et al. report, "[t]he judges found that the law, as enacted, interfered with women's security of person as guaranteed under the [Canadian] Charter [of Rights and Freedoms]" (1996, 428). While the ultimate success of the second-wave feminist campaign for reproductive autonomy during the 1960s and 1970s was seen as an expression of female power, the need for a fight at all speaks to a cultural tradition wherein the authority to control reproduction is vested in the nation rather than in the woman.

In *Surfacing*, too, no matter what the pregnant narrator does, her choices are compromised by her gender. She could have the baby despite her lover's disapproval but apparently decides that the consequences are not worth it. Pitted against lover and nation, she faces constraints on her choices throughout the novel as she repeatedly faces decisions among unacceptable options. Lodged in a dilemma of what she does not want and cannot have, she becomes a nationally-defined criminal.

Caren Kaplan offers a further reason for reading this novel as sabotaging notions of paradigmatic female and national identities, namely that "women have had a problematic relationship to the modern nation-state and its construction of subjectivity" (Kaplan 1999, 1), meaning that national histories reveal conflictual relations between gender and state. In *Surfacing*, two Canadian men, Joe and David, both attempt sexual assaults on the protagonist. Significantly, each one is a nationally coded man, one as Canadian and the other as American. Both press unwanted sex on the narrator in the same geographic area where the American camp is located. It is also the area where she recollects her abortion.

The narrator's sudden recollection of her abortion (putting the lie to her story about getting married and having a baby) occurs at the same site where she misperceives national identity. While at first glance this conflation may seem an indication of parallel victimization, it will turn out to be a place where female and Canadian identities collide. When the narrator seeks

out this spot, she is careful to mark it for the reader: "According to the map the rock painting was in a bay near the Americans' camp....I looked for a dip in the shore, a line that would fit the mapline. It was there, site of the x, unmistakable cliff with sheer face, the kind they would have chosen to paint on, no other flat rock in sight" (Atwood 1972, 131). Up to this point in the novel, the narrator has shown herself to be fiercely nationalistic, but in the oft-quoted recognition scene she experiences a shock to her sense of national identity. She is forced to realize that she cannot recognize Canadians:

"We're not from the States," I said, annoyed that he'd mistaken me for one of them.  
"No kidding?" His face lit up, he'd seen a real native. "You from here?"  
"Yes," I said. "We all are."  
"So are we," said the back one unexpectedly. The front one held out his hand, though five feet of water separated us. "I'm from Sarnia and Fred here, my brother-in-law, is from Toronto. We thought you were Yanks, with the hair and all." (Atwood 1972, 133)

Later, the narrator returns to look for the rock paintings: "I moved toward the cliff...Overhead a plane, so far up I could hardly hear it, threading the cities together with its trail of smoke; an x in the sky, unsacred crucifix...I reached the cliff, there were no Americans. I edged along it, estimating the best place to dive" (Atwood 1972, 145-46).

Since the site has already been marked for national identity confusion, the temptation is to associate the confusion about nationality with the repressed abortion. But as the narrator plans her dive, Atwood further complicates the relationship between female and national identities by also marking this site as the place where a Canadian man perpetrates a sexually coercive act on the Canadian female narrator that could compromise her reproductive autonomy. If the female protagonist is

feeling victimized by Americans, why is it Joe, her Canadian lover, who follows her up the cliff to force himself on her sexually?

The narrator is more assertive with her victimizer in this situation than previously in that she tells him she does not love him. His response is not to withdraw into hurt feelings or characteristic sulkiness but instead to press his advantage as a male: "then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument" (Atwood 1972, 147). Although she eventually chooses him to be the father of her child, at this point she fights him off: "I slid my arm between us, against his throat, windpipe, and pried his head away. 'I'll get pregnant,' I said, 'it's the right time.' It was the truth, it stopped him: flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them" (Atwood 1972, 147). Having been coerced by her married lover into having an abortion, the narrator now is faced with the possibility of being coerced into becoming pregnant again by Joe. Joe clearly feels he can sexually coerce her, and he is aligned with the married lover in his wish not to reproduce with her. While the national identity of the married lover figured only tangentially in the plot, Joe is often recognized by critics as a specifically Canadian man. As such, he creates the impression of libidinally inflected national interests as he attempts to compromise the sexual and potentially reproductive autonomy of the narrator.

Joe has pressed for marriage throughout the text, but the narrator's resistance to him reflects her rejection of the roles of wife and mother that would likely be forced upon her if he were successful in this scene. Significantly, her resistance directly follows the recollection and admission of her abortion, suggesting that she is increasingly determined to pit herself against the men in her life who would threaten her sexual and reproductive autonomy. Joe might be considered a Canadian "work in process." Maureen Devine claims he is "the mediator between the protagonist and civilization,

because he really belongs to neither. She can trust him in the end because, 'he isn't anything, he is only half-formed'" (Devine 1992, 192). Atwood "does not depict [Joe] through any gender stereotypes - he is masculine through biology not through social construct" (1992, 151). Yet Joe's actions range from proposing marriage, to sexual aggression, to sexual infidelity, all culturally significant acts related to social constructions of masculinity at the time. Atwood tempts the reader to regard Joe as the victim he sees himself to be, "'The truth is...you think my work is crap, you think I'm a loser and I'm not worth it'" (Atwood 1972, 110). But the victim changes seamlessly back to victimizer whenever he recognizes that he has an advantage to press. Seen as a sexually aggressive Canadian male, Joe interferes with his supposedly benign role as a biological man who is not socially constructed as male. Instead, he can be recognized as knowing how to capitalize on whatever power he has in a way that destabilizes any sense of victimization parallel to that of the narrator.

In case the narrator should think her encounter with Joe is an anomaly, it is followed by a replay of attempted sexual coercion, this time with pseudo-American David, with largely the same result. David repeats Joe's behaviour by following her down the trail and making a pass:

I willed him to go away but he didn't; after a while he put his hand on my knee.

"Well?" he said.

I looked at him. His smile was like a benevolent uncle's; under his forehead there was a plan, it corrugated the skin. I pushed his hand off and he put it back again.

"How about it?" he said. "You wanted me to follow you."

His fingers were squeezing, he was drawing away some of the power, I would lose it and come apart again, the lies would recapture.

"Please don't," I said. (Atwood 1972, 156)

Her plea does not stop him: "He reached his arm around me, invading, and pulled me over towards him; his neck was creased and freckled, soon he would have jowls, he smelled like scalp. His moustache whisked my face" (Atwood 1972, 156). The narrator's next response is the one she used successfully with Joe: "'I'd get pregnant'" (Atwood 1972, 157). Whereas Joe quickly retreats, David (the Canadian nationalist who distinguishes himself because "[s]econd-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen") persists (Atwood 1972, 158). This time, she offers her own lack of desire as a legitimate explanation: "'I'm sorry," I said, "but you don't turn me on"' (Atwood 1972, 157). His shallow ego bruised, David responds: "'You,' he said, searching for words, not controlled any more, 'tight-ass bitch'" (Atwood 1972, 157).

That she feels entitled to offer her own lack of desire in the place of biological practicality seems like a step forward. Even more striking, however, is the pattern of threats to the narrator's sexual and reproductive autonomy. Whether it is the married lover who pressures her into criminality as defined by the nation, Joe the partially formed Canadian who pressures her sexually, or David the repressed American wannabe who does the same, the narrator is consistently presented with some form of national threat. Such pressure ties the protagonist to Anne McClintock's contention that nationalism leads to a range of predictable gender roles for women "as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities[;] as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations)[;] as active transmitters and producers of the national culture[;] as symbolic signifiers of national difference[;] as active participants in national struggles" (McClintock 1995, 355). Without an environment that protects and supports her sexual and reproductive autonomy, she seems likely to be betrayed again.

What is the narrative point of replaying the narrator's resistance to two Canadian men whose advances she rejects to protect her sexual and

reproductive autonomy? An answer to this question suggests another reason for reading this novel as one that speaks to the tension between female and national identities, and that is the novel's much discussed equivocal ending. The narrator's eventual decision to have a baby with Joe suggests that, having considered her options, she has resigned herself to make do with him as the least of all evils. Instead of gaining the independence one might have hoped would result from her successful rejection of the advances made by nationally coded victimizer men, she seems destined for an increasingly circumscribed life as a wife and a mother in Canada, which is at this time developing a national culture. If the ending points to compromised female autonomy rather than women's self-definition and empowerment through identity, what is the novel's message on this issue?

Some critics have interpreted the ending as providing a vision of Canada as "natural" and as a construct that encompasses gender. As Devine explains,

Once the gods of nature recede, put at rest by the protagonist, she can come out of the intense identification experience to see nature, the gods, the environment, trees, as neither allied to her as feminine elements, nor against her as masculine elements; they are only neutral elements...The sophistication with which Atwood deals with the issue of ecological ideology belies the compromised ending. Atwood backs down in the end rather than break through the boundaries; it is as if she had touched them, found a wall, and decided to stay comfortably within. (1992, 139)

There seems a wish here for Atwood to follow up the elimination of gender from the environment with the elimination of gender from relations between the sexes. This would presumably constitute the desired "refusal of objectification" that would not leave "the possibility of identification with the dominant culture

ambiguously open" (Devine 1992, 45). One wonders what such a break-through ending might look like. Perhaps the protagonist could return to the city alone, demonstrating that she does not need any man to raise her child. Perhaps she could stay on her father's property and raise her child, alone or with Joe. However, her pregnancy still connects her with socially, libidinally and nationally constructed worlds and all the dangers they involve.

The point of the abortion does not seem to be that the narrator has been forced to give up what she wanted with the married lover in order to create something better with Joe. Nor is having the child she now carries likely to solve problems of limited female autonomy in a Canadian national setting. Christ observes that the ending points to even more such problems: "Atwood's protagonist's journey leads her to the decision to conceive a child beneath the full moon, a decision that feminists might not immediately applaud, especially since Atwood does not show how her protagonist will integrate motherhood with work, relations with other adults, or politics" (Christ 1976, 317). By deciding to become pregnant and to see the pregnancy through to birth, the protagonist takes physical control of her sexual and reproductive capacities. Still, she faces a social environment that will likely continue to undermine her autonomy, and her relationship with Joe as one that will likely fail. The point of the ending may be that the interaction of female and national identities is still a problem, even in a social environment where an individual woman is willing to fight for her sexual and reproductive autonomy. Joe will probably be a restless bedfellow, and that may well be the strategy of an ending that stops short of de-gendering the protagonist's social world.

Jon Kertzer asserts that "there have always been challenges to the nationalist ideology, first made in the name of realism, modernism, or cosmopolitanism, now made in the name of feminism, ethnicity, postmodernism, or postcolonialism" (Kertzer 1998, 22). In our twenty-first century experience, when Canadian

nationalism and second-wave feminism no longer inform dominant social movements, it makes sense that this novel would take on new inflections of meaning. Surfacing can be appreciated as an investigation of the perhaps inevitable conflict that arises for female autonomy in national, and by extrapolation, international circumstances. The novel's significance in a contemporary context may well be the conflicted relationship between national purpose and female autonomy.

#### Endnotes

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1. The magazine reported that the survey "[o]verwhelmingly bears out opinions already expressed by women's groups, and repeated in the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women...that abortion should be permitted on demand up until the twelfth week of pregnancy." Of the 1,741 respondents who reported having had abortions, 1,278 said they were done illegally in Canada. Of the 763 who described who it was that performed the illegal abortions, 233 did it themselves, 276 had a nonmedical person, 194 had a paramedical person, and the remaining 60 chose either a member of the family, a male partner, or a friend (Chatelaine, March 1971, 23 & 68).

2. Abortion laws understood as statements of national values regarding reproductive control allow for new understandings of the interaction of female and national identities in North America. Jelen and Chandler note "The close similarity between abortion attitudes in the United States and Canada appears to result from markedly different processes." United States citizens might oppose abortion because of religious beliefs but are reluctant to impose their beliefs on others, whereas in Canada "antiabortion attitudes are not suppressed by individualistic values, [but] such attitudes are inhibited by the relatively [sic] lack of religiosity among Canadians. Thus, abortion attitudes in the United States are shaped by powerful cultural forces, pulling public opinion in opposite directions. In Canada, by contrast, the effects of religion and individualism both appear to be relatively

weak" (Jelen and Chandler 1994, 139). Americans might suggest that a woman should be prohibited from having an abortion because it offends God, but their own counterargument to such a religious prohibition resides in her identification as an American (whose individual rights are paramount). By contrast, Canadians might suggest that a woman's relationship to God is her own business, and she might be granted an abortion because, in a pluralist society, the nation-state should not impose its notions about morality on a diverse populace. Opposition to abortion may also come from a religious population in Canada but, like the United States, it is the nation that assumes responsibility for defining the basis on which access will or will not be restricted. This Canadian national spin on a woman's issue became strikingly evident in Justice Minister John Turner's introduction of Criminal Code reforms on abortion in 1969, when the Liberal government passed a bill that allowed a hospital medical committee to approve an abortion to preserve a pregnant woman's life or health. Although the Canadian Catholic Conference of the Roman Catholic Church prohibited Roman Catholics from practising birth control, its reason for not opposing the abortion law was Canada's identification as a pluralistic society. Turner cited national pluralism as the basis for allowing female autonomy in this particular circumstance: "In a pluralist society there may be different standards, differing attitudes and the law cannot reflect them all. Public order, in this situation of a pluralistic society, cannot substitute for private conduct" (Tatalovich 1997, 34). The suggestion that a woman's right to control her reproductive capacity is legitimated by the existence of a pluralist society implies that this autonomy is justified by her national politicians' commitment to including a variety of perspectives in national laws and policies that value cultural and moral differences.

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