

Abortion and Mommy Memoirs

Vilar's *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict*

*This essay explores the genre of the mommy memoir for its abortion politics. Building on feminist critiques of the genre's reliance on bio-essentialist ideas of motherhood, I consider both the potential and limitations within the genre for representing abortion experiences. In this essay I analyze Irene Vilar's *Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict* (2009) for its rhetorical appropriation of the mommy memoir form in order to tell a story of reproductive excess.*

Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict (2009) is a second autobiography by the Puerto Rican author and editor Irene Vilar. In it Vilar recalls how the writing of her first memoir, *The Ladies Gallery* (1996), an account of her troubled relationships with her suicidal mother and single-minded nationalist grandmother, was haunted by her husband's editorial influence. While he attributed her struggles with depression and suicide to her difficult maternal legacy, his version of her life-story suppressed their reproductive history, including twelve abortions. In this essay, I consider how Vilar appropriates the form and conventions of the so-called "mommy memoir" in this second autobiography to tell her story of reproductive excess. I argue that mommy memoirs are an unexpected and critically neglected site where women writers present their experiences with abortion within a rhetorically safe framework. By claiming the culturally sanctioned identity of mother through her use of this form, Vilar is rhetorically authorized to share her radical story of repeat abortion.

Conventions of the Mommy Memoir

The "mommy memoir" is a relatively new genre of life writing that emerged

in the 1990s. These texts are autobiographical accounts of motherhood, told from the mother's viewpoint. They conventionally narrate maternal ambivalence, as well as difficulties in conceiving, pregnancy, childbirth, and initial forays into parenting. Origins of the genre have been credited to Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* (1993) and Anne Roiphe's *Fruitful: A Real Mother in a Modern World* (1996). As the title of Lamott's text suggests, the characteristic form of the mommy memoir is the journal, diary or chronicle sometimes addressed to the child of the author but more often to a broader audience of mostly sympathetic mother-readers. The mommy memoir has close ties to the online web log (blog) or "mommy blog," as several authors began as blog-writers and then compiled and published their narratives. Mommy blogs have enjoyed wide popularity due in part to the ease with which they lend themselves to interrupted writing and reading practices but also due to the sense of community they build and alternatives to media depictions of motherhood (Hammond). This popularity has extended to the mommy memoir genre, which now commands its own section in some bookstores and generates over 600 hits on *Amazon.com*.

The genre arose during the decade that saw a redefinition of motherhood as well as an intensifying surveillance of mothers. In *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (2004), media scholars Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels explain how the 1990s saw a conservative backlash against feminist gains from the previous two decades and a redefining of femininity and motherhood to re-contain women's social advancements. Their work shows how media fascination with celebrity pregnancies, mothers who murder their children, child abductions, and the "mommy wars" allegedly waged between stay-at-home and working mothers, focused cultural attention on definitions of "good" women and mothers. According to Douglas and Michaels, this fascination helped to disseminate "intensive mothering" ideology, a belief that normalizes women's primacy in parenting (over fathers), defines the primacy of the child in their lives, and calls for their self-sacrifice to the needs of the child. Douglas and Michaels name this the "New Momism," a new discursive deployment dedicated to recontaining women within patriarchal definitions of motherhood while celebrating the choices that women are seemingly "free" to make. From this cultural context, the mommy memoir emerged as a vehicle for deploying this new discourse of motherhood and creating new "good" and "bad" maternal subjects. However, the genre also has created a space for subverting and resisting those cultural identities.

The popular success of this form has not gone unnoticed by feminist critics. In particular, the emerging academic-activist field of Motherhood Studies has turned a critical eye to the mommy memoir. As an interdisciplinary field,

Motherhood Studies combines theories and methods of sociology, psychology, gender studies, legal studies, and literary studies, and its body of scholarship spans the past three decades, including the writings of such diverse theorists as Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Nancy Chodorow. Motherhood Studies seeks to understand (as Rich originally proposed) the constraints of *motherhood* as a patriarchal institution and *mothering* as a potentially empowering lived practice engaged in by women. This framework for inquiry is particularly well-suited for parsing the potential and limitations of the mommy memoir.

Some feminist critics have celebrated how mommy memoir authors subvert normative motherhood and/or the “intensive mothering” ideology by telling stories of “bad” mothering, alternative family structures, or maternal ambivalence (Frye). Other critics speak favorably of the genre’s power to connect women in their resistance to mothering norms, thus combating feelings of isolation and persecution (Dymond and Willey). However others critics see a disquieting conservative agenda informing the genre. These critics ponder its depictions of mothers surrendering their careers without question to stay home and raise children, an absence of fathers performing similar feats of self-sacrifice, and an emphasis on women’s embodiment and mothering as a re-naturalizing of socially constructed gender differences. Ivana Brown analyzes the tendency in mommy memoirs towards bio-essentialized ideas of gender and motherhood. Brown surveys several examples of the genre from 2000 to 2004 and contends that they reinscribe gender inequality through an unchallenged depiction of naturalized gender dualism (the belief that men and women are biologically more different than alike), emphasis on the maternal body, and celebration of the natural mother myth (the notion that women instinctually mother). Andrea O’Reilly has extended Brown’s observations to claim that the genre’s turn to bio-essentialized motherhood arises from its ideological reliance on intensive mothering. O’Reilly argues that “as this new ideology made possible a public voice on motherhood, it simultaneously limited what that voice could say about motherhood” (205). Despite the seeming freedom mommy memoir writers have to critique motherhood as an institution, O’Reilly argues, the texts fail to challenge the gender assumptions that underpin it: “this discourse [intensive mothering] ultimately reinscribes, or more accurately naturalizes and normalizes, the very patriarchal conditions of motherhood that feminists, including the motherhood memoir writers themselves, seek to dismantle” (205). She concludes that the genre only succeeds in critiquing social norms rather than in advancing any meaningful change.

Building from O’Reilly’s work, I would add that we can also see how mommy memoirs are wedded to the consumerism that drives the New Momism. Rebecca Walker’s *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence*

(2007) for example, provides a characteristic but truly tiresome account of her various prenatal consumer activities, including: contemplating fertility treatments; visits to manicurists, massage therapists, homeopaths, and osteopaths; shopping and dining; interviews with doulas and midwives between visits to her obstetrician; consultations with a home-improvement contractor; organized spiritual retreats and meetings with spiritual teachers and a Tibetan doctor; anxiety over the cost of boarding schools; a baby shower; and the selection of the hospital. Many examples of the genre recount similar consumer adventures required of “good mothers” or they recount overcoming the guilt produced by an inability to perform at the expected level of consumerism. The conflation of maternity with consumerism is not as “natural” as would appear, however. Douglas and Michaels observe,

A key tenet of the new momism—that it was crucial to invest in as many goods and services for your child as possible—was very, very profitable. The spread of cable TV, which brought distant UHF stations and kid-specific channels like Nickelodeon, Disney, The Cartoon Network, Fox Family, and MTV into the home, made targeting mothers and kids much easier, and more incessant. The ever-ballooning standards of good motherhood were inflated even further by the simultaneous exhortations to buy more, buy better, buy sooner. (269)

In the same way that mommy memoirs critique but ultimately fail to challenge gender inequality, we can also see in the genre a failure to challenge class politics and consumer-based definitions of “good mother.”

Similarly, the absence of mommy memoirs by women of color—Walker’s work is a rare exception—reflects how the genre serves to advance the racial ideology informing New Momism. As Deesha Philyaw and Nicole Willey both note in their essays, there is a relative dearth of mommy memoirs by black women. Philyaw seeks to encourage more black women to take on the genre through experimenting with online forms of life-writing first; whereas Willey notes that a shift in the critical/readerly definition of mothering enables one to recognize a longer tradition of black women writing about motherhood. By considering the race of the authors and audiences for these texts, these critics reveal that the mommy memoir genre recognizes some women (white, middleclass) as legitimate mothers with experience and authority to write about mothering experience. Nonwhite women’s experience and authority remains under-recognized. This failure to see the mothering experience of women of color and black women in particular can be understood through historian Rickie Solinger’s account of contemporary motherhood in *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United*

States (2001). Solinger's work does not address the New Momism or intensive mothering per se; however, her work does trace how the contemporary moment reflects a long historical tradition in which certain (first world, middle-classed, privileged) women's choices to mother are socially sanctioned and supported while other women (third world, poor, and usually nonwhite) are exploited and their reproductive choices are negated. Solinger does not discuss the mommy memoir genre, but her work offers one explanation for the lack of (demand for and production of) texts by women of color and helps to expose the racial ideological/political work performed by these texts.

In this essay, however, I also consider the unexpected and critically unremarked appearance of abortion in mommy memoirs. Despite the genre's conservative gender politics in some regards, the mommy memoir has from its origins been an interesting space in which abortion is discussed. The work of Anne Lamott, Rebecca Walker, and Ayelet Waldman (*Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional moments of Grace*), for example, all include reflections on abortions that took place prior to their childbearing experiences as well as during. These three texts espouse prochoice politics and reveal the complexity of abortion decision-making as well as post-abortion feelings of grief. Centrally positioned in Walker's *Baby Love*, for example, is a chapter that begins, "Oh, that it were possible to write about having a baby in America without writing about not having a baby. I am talking about abortion of course" (99). Walker describes having an abortion as a teenager and her concerns (that, as a result, she is disqualified from motherhood) and fears (that she had been sterilized), which lingered into her adult years. For my purposes, Walker's aggrieved tone in the above statement is intriguing for how it points to the normalized convention of discussing abortion in mommy memoirs. Perhaps due to the genre's common and destigmatized depiction of medicalized reproduction and childbearing experiences—including fertility testing, treatment, and childbirth—there seems to be a relative comfort for some authors in including discussions of abortion experiences. Although abortion remains a highly stigmatized practice in the larger culture, it is in fact a normal part of women's reproductive healthcare and so its appearance should not come as any surprise in these autobiographical accounts of motherhood. And yet it is surprising, given the conservative underpinnings of the genre discussed above. Ultimately, the appearance of abortion in these texts may offer a new way of reading their political potential.

In this essay I would like to examine *Impossible Motherhood* in terms of these critical observations of the mommy memoir genre. Although Vilar's text begins as a memoir of her experience of repeat abortion, the last third of the text adopts the form of the mommy memoir, becoming a daily journal addressed to her first daughter before her birth and one year following. This reading contextualizes

Impossible Motherhood within the mommy memoir genre by considering how Vilar's work uses the form of the genre as well as its characteristic reliance on bio-essentialized ideas of motherhood. Vilar's text seeks to negotiate an anticipated hostile audience of both prochoice and antiabortion readers in order to "defend" repeat abortion. The mommy memoir, I argue, offers an imperfect vehicle for this defense.

Impossible Motherhood: Testimony of an Abortion Addict

Vilar was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico in 1969 and is an author and editor currently living on the U.S. mainland. *The Ladies' Gallery* (1996), her first memoir narrating her formative years, was short-listed for the Mind Book of the Year Award (recognizing writing on mental health issues) and garnered critical attention as a *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Detroit Free Press* notable book of the year. In it Vilar weaves her personal narrative into the histories of her mother and her notorious grandmother, Lolita Lebron. This first memoir constructs a lineage of female suffering, martyrdom, and depression in the context of colonialism, dwelling in particular on her grandmother's single-minded focus on politics and nationalist myth-making and her mother's suicide in 1977 when Vilar was only eight years old. Published over ten years after her first memoir, *Impossible Motherhood* reveals a more complex context for Vilar's struggles with depression and suicide: readers learn of her youthful marriage to her former professor, a man more than thirty years her senior with whom she had multiple unplanned pregnancies and abortions.

This second memoir recounts how Vilar had fifteen abortions over sixteen years while in relationships with two men. She narrates a cycle of unplanned pregnancies motivated by lack of self-care and a secret desire to defy her husband. Each pregnancy was a rebellion against his wish to remain childless and his belief that women's freedom depends on forgoing motherhood. This rebellion, however, threatened her with the frightening prospect of becoming a single mother. Vilar diagnoses herself as being an abortion "addict," swinging between the highs and lows of control and chaos and only "cured" later in her second marriage by motherhood, which the text depicts as an instinctual drive that motivated her multiple pregnancies. Vilar speculates that listening to this instinct and bearing children healed the trauma of losing her own mother, whose suicide, she believes, arose from depression brought on by an unnecessary hysterectomy performed as part of a U.S.-backed sterilization program of Puerto Rican women.

Vilar's memoir presents readers with a difficult, uncomfortable discussion of what "choice" looks like in women's lives, and how we are and are not the rational actors upon which prochoice rhetoric and legislation is predicated.

Considering the charged feelings surrounding repeat abortion, Vilar understandably struggled to get this work published—ultimately working with Other Press, an independent publisher, and Judith Gurewich, a sympathetic editor. Introduced by Robin Morgan and endorsed by Gloria Feldt, the book's proceeds are promised in part to Sisterhood is Global, the organization created by Morgan and Simone de Beauvoir. Vilar's sensationally subtitled work was reviewed in *The Washington Post* and on ABC News, received the Independent Publisher Book Award (IPPY), and has generated numerous book club discussions and reactions in both prochoice and antiabortion electronic forums such as *Jezebel* and *National Right to Life News*. Many commentators pronounced Vilar to be mentally ill (unjustly, I believe) and dismissed her work for that reason.

In its prologue, *Impossible Motherhood* demonstrates awareness of its audiences' divergent and opposed attitudes about abortion when self-identified prochoice Vilar observes, "I was warned about the possible hatred directed at me from both pro-choice and pro-life camps. My testimony was fated to be misunderstood" (1). This essay examines how *Impossible Motherhood* seeks to narrate a radical story of repeat abortion—an issue that evokes enormous stigma—by an unexpected but audience-appeasing reliance on the conventions of the popular mommy memoir. This rhetorical maneuver enables Vilar to represent her unplanned pregnancies as the result of a natural desire for motherhood. Abortion, in this telling, becomes an unnatural response explained through the metaphor of addiction. Finally motherhood, the inherent but repressed desire, "cures" and redeems Vilar. Ultimately, it is what also authorizes her to tell her story of repeat abortion as a mommy memoir. Had Vilar not become a mother, I argue, there would have been no literary form that could adequately serve as a sympathetic vehicle for her story.

Impossible Motherhood as Mommy Memoir: Bio-essentialized Motherhood

At the age of fifteen, Vilar left Puerto Rico to become a student at Syracuse University, where she met her future husband, an Argentinean Jewish professor of Latin American literature more than thirty years her senior. Struggling with language difference, younger than traditional students, and orphaned by the loss of her mother, Vilar immediately fell under his spell and began an affair that led to their marriage. *Impossible Motherhood* emphasizes Vilar's youthful awe of his worldliness and scholarly life, the threat she felt from his previous marriages and wives, and her quick submission, ironically mythologizing him as her "master." Vilar repeatedly became pregnant, contrary to his wishes, and aborted a total of twelve times in eleven years to avoid becoming a single mother (he threatened to abandon her if she had a

baby). She describes a downward spiral in her self-esteem during this time, contemplating suicide “in the same way I would make love without birth control; without thinking about the consequences” (53). The older narrator of *Impossible Motherhood* knowingly damns “her master” by exposing not only his sexual exploitation of a minor and student and his failure to share in the responsibility for birth control, but also by presenting him as a man whose previous wives financially supported him but who nevertheless insisted that Vilar pay her own way in their relationship, and who hypocritically expressed a preference for younger women who were “unformed ... unfinished, with not too many wounds” (51).

The second half of *Impossible Motherhood* narrates the end of Vilar’s first marriage, an affair, her remarriage, and motherhood. It also introduces her self-diagnosis as an abortion “addict,” as a way to explain the cycle of unplanned pregnancy and abortion she continues despite her escape from her “master.” Shortly after the publication of *The Ladies’ Gallery* and her divorce, she has an affair resulting in three unplanned pregnancies and abortions, which then need to be explained to readers (if she is no longer under the thrall of her master, why does this pattern persist?). She procures her fifteenth abortion while visiting her family in Puerto Rico in 2002, where she learns of her brother Fonso’s struggle with heroin, an addiction that led to another brother’s death. Her encounter with Fonso serves as a watershed moment and potent point of comparison for her own life: musing on her brothers’ suffering, Vilar proposes her cycle of abortion as her own addiction.

The final chapters of Vilar’s memoir present motherhood as the “cure” for her unnatural “addiction” by providing an identity: natural mother. These last chapters recount Vilar’s happy, whirlwind courtship by her second husband, their marriage, and their desire to become pregnant. Relocated to Colorado, Vilar abandons descriptions of her writing career and instead focuses on her experience of pregnancy and motherhood. The collapse of motherhood and “the natural” is reinforced in the final chapters where she sympathetically reflects on the natural landscape: “There is something freeing whenever nature and I have met [...] Right now, being pregnant feels much like such encounters with nature” (210). This image of nature and domesticity contrasts with Vilar’s description of visiting her burned-out maternal home during her last trip to Puerto Rico and her first husband’s “home” on a sailboat owned by his ex-wife. Additionally, the reification of pregnancy as natural and abortion as unnatural is echoed in her description of the landscape of her cervix as “ravaged” (193) and her concern that she will not be able to carry her pregnancy to term. Through recourse to images of the natural landscape and connections to Vilar’s body, motherhood becomes the natural cure for her unnatural addiction to abortion.

At this point in the narrative, the memoir makes a shift to describing Vilar's early reproductive history not in terms of defying her husband but as expressing her maternal desire. When Vilar divorces, the memoir recasts her history of unplanned pregnancy as an expression of maternal desire and instinct. Earlier youthful behaviors are re-cast as subtle expressions of her maternal urges: she remembers herself obsessively "mothering" her step-sisters and friends and compulsively buying books on adoption; her summer internship following her sophomore year in college is spent scanning 17th Century church records for evidence of infanticide; she "mothered" a college friend after a life-threatening car accident; during her pregnancies with her first husband, she recalls wandering through stores gazing at baby clothes; and following her divorce, she praises her subsequent lover as "a man [who] shared in my maternal desire" (167). For her entire life, the text assures readers, Vilar possessed a fascination with motherhood: "I always thought I'd be somebody. I have imagined myself a president, a saint, a mother, sailor, writer, publisher, mother again. Many times over I imagined myself a mother" (194).

The narrative becomes a rushed, unconvincing jumble of explanations and epiphanies as it attempts to draw together Vilar's thoughts about her own mother and motherhood, as well as her feelings of shame and need for "redemption" (5):

I was not a survivor until I overcame my fear of mothering the child in my womb. It was halfway through my sixteenth pregnancy that I found peace with my maternal desire and fell in love with my situation and the future gestating in me. My daughter Loretta Mae became the coherence emerging from the shameful mass of thirty-five years. (208)

Vilar's narrative shifts in the epilogue to a direct address to Loretta Mae as "you." In these last pages Vilar fashions for herself a maternal identity that serves to authorize her discussion of repeat abortion. Uncertain medicine at best, the text constructs motherhood and her child as redemption and renewal. In one direct address to her daughter, she observes: "you run to me with your arms outstretched, seeking a hug, a hug that feels like a dip in the ocean, a baptism, a rebirth" (220). Abortion is something she must protect this child from and confess to: "I read books on psychology and infant development, searching for all the ways I can protect you from me" (219). And now, "redeemed" by motherhood, she can tell readers about it as well.

One of the few mentions of Vilar's writing career in the last chapters is an account of a public reading at which she shares drafts of *Impossible Motherhood*: "I gave a lecture today on the writing of memoirs and read about abortion with a round, big pregnant belly keeping me far from the microphone. I didn't

think I could do it. As I walked to the podium I kept saying to myself: They won't understand. You'll be despised" (209). Rhetorically, the fact that Vilar delivers her talk and goes on to publish the memoir depends on the culturally sanctioned identity of mother, which authorizes her to discuss abortion but only by silencing it as "shameful" and "unnatural," a pathology from which she has been cured. The socially acceptable identity of "mother" authorizes the memoir's otherwise unacceptable testimony of abortion. In this manner the text reinforces an opposition between abortion and motherhood: only the maternal subject may safely speak (without condemnation) while the aborting subject remains silent, in the past, and spoken for.

Impossible Motherhood's argument that child-bearing is a natural urge or instinct draws on ideas of bio-essentialized motherhood, which is characteristic of the mommy memoir. Additional traits of "intensive mothering" can be seen in the text: motherhood becomes Vilar's most important identity, sidelines her writing career, and dominates the subsequent writing that she does produce; her pregnant body is naturalized through comparison to the natural world; and gender dualism is enforced through her role as primary care-giver to her child. Drawing on this same ideology of bio-essentialism, the text depicts abortion as an unnatural urge, which is unusual compared to how other mommy memoir authors represent abortion—Lamott, Walker, and Waldman, for example. These authors portray abortion as a reasoned decision (not urge) that produces grief but is not regretted. The opposition of repeat abortion and motherhood in terms of unnatural or natural urges in *Impossible Motherhood* attempts to avoid the deliberateness of Vilar's decisions—both to have abortions and to bear children. The impulse to side-step agency is understandable given the heavy stigma and shame assigned to abortion and repeat abortion in particular. As a result, however, women's agency is suppressed in the text; Vilar is passively driven by urges. The danger of this construction lies in the misrepresentation of the factors motivating women's decisions (not urges) to either abort or to continue unplanned pregnancies.

Despite Vilar's self-identification as prochoice, her memoir "defends" abortion through recourse to ideologies of bio-essentialized motherhood and intensive mothering that serve to uphold gender inequality. While this strategy may redeem Vilar, it will not serve to protect women's reproductive freedoms. The statistics behind repeat abortion suggest that it is neither an addiction nor unnatural, nor is motherhood a natural cure. Vilar's claims of a diagnosis and cure for "abortion addiction" are limited if not presumptive. At the very least, research suggests a complexity to repeat abortion that the rhetoric of "natural" instincts and "unnatural" pathology fails to capture. In what follows I consider some of this research as a way of understanding the limitations of *Impossible Motherhood's* political work.

Repeat Abortion, Mothers, and Mothering Decisions

Although Vilar describes her experience with repeat abortion in terms addictions and desires, it is more productive to understand her narrative in terms of the problem of unplanned pregnancy and the situational factors that can contribute to it. Repeat abortion is objectionable to many, including many abortion supporters. It is popularly assumed to be rare and to reflect bad-choice making on the part of the woman (“Didn’t she learn from her first mistake?”). Interwoven with these beliefs is the overarching stereotype that abortion is a problem mostly involving unwed teenage girls who fail to use birth control. However, research conducted by the Guttmacher Institute disproves these beliefs. Teen pregnancy rates have steadily decreased over the decades, and more than half of abortion patients are in their twenties (“Induced Abortion”). Over half of women seeking abortions report using birth control during the month they got pregnant. Indeed, experts point out that were a woman to rely on abortion as her only method of birth control, she would (on average) require thirty abortions over the course of a normal reproductive lifespan (Baumgardner). Almost half of women seeking abortions annually have had at least one prior termination; repeat abortion patients are more likely to be older than women obtaining their first abortions. According to a 2006 occasional report from the Guttmacher Institute, women having repeat abortions are somewhat more likely to be black, less likely to have a college degree, and “slightly more likely to have Medicaid coverage” than other abortion patients. While overall six out of ten women obtaining abortions already have children, in 2006 “the proportion of repeat abortion patients with three or more prior births was more than twice that of first-time abortion patients (19 percent vs. 8 percent)” (20).

In her essay, “Twice is a spanking,” from *Abortion Under Attack*, Jennifer Baumgardner explores the stigma attached to repeat abortion, noting that even women who readily support reproductive rights by admitting to having had one abortion are unlikely to admit to having repeat abortions. Baumgardner observes how in pro-choice circles, repeat abortion raises questions of control, power, and responsibility that produce shame. Her work’s title, (seemingly taken from the childrearing dictum “*Once is funny, twice is silly, third time deserves a spanking*”) comments on the condescending, paternalistic surveillance of women’s reproductive choices. Baumgardner sympathetically reports that some men feel a sense of irresponsibility for their roles in repeat abortion, but she does not explore the unequal burden of social stigma against repeat abortion borne by women. Responsibility for birth control (or its failure) still falls on women. Baumgardner’s essay does assert that the stigma on repeat abortion reflects the larger distrust of women’s abilities to make any reproductive decisions.

As the authors of the 2006 Guttmacher report note, this stigma is enforced by negative stereotypical beliefs about women having repeat abortions: they are often negatively perceived as “having difficulty practicing contraception, as lacking motivation to prevent unintended pregnancy, as using abortion as a method of family planning, or as being different from other women in more fundamental ways.” Despite the inaccuracy of these beliefs, support for abortion rights is often qualified with reference to such stereotypes. The denouncement of abortion “as birth control” often made by otherwise pro-choice feminists, led to the questioning of what was meant by Hilary Clinton’s comment in 2008 that abortion should be “safe, legal and rare.” Her emphasis on “rare” suggested to some a focus on reducing unplanned pregnancy; however, others worried her remark conceded to popular views that abortion should not be “abused” as a regular method of birth control.

Distrust for women’s reproductive decision-making focuses on the decision to abort but neglects the situational factors that make access to abortion necessary. Repeat abortion comes into focus more clearly through a recognition of the underlying problem of unplanned pregnancy. The authors of the Guttmacher report observe that understanding repeat abortion requires a paradigm shift:

Abortion is an essential part of reproductive health for many women, and women who utilize abortion services more than once should not be viewed negatively. As no woman gets pregnant for the purpose of having an abortion, the current level of repeat abortion is one indicator that a large number of U.S. women have multiple unintended pregnancies. In studying this issue, our intent is not to draw negative attention to repeat abortion or women who obtain them. Rather, we hope to generate productive discussions of the issue and help reframe the topic and change the language used to discuss it.

The authors argue for increased contraceptive counseling and availability as a means of reducing the rate of unintended pregnancy and note that there is still much to learn about repeat abortion, including the circumstances that reduce an individual’s ability to prevent unintended pregnancy:

These include intimate partner violence (including sexual violence and coercion), partners’ conflicting preferences regarding pregnancy, inadequate access to effective contraceptives and inaccurate knowledge about the risk of pregnancy during the menstrual cycle.

Reproductive justice advocates seek to illuminate the complicated systems

of oppression based on economic class, age, ethnicity, gender, and language (to name a few) in the background of repeat abortion and its underlying problem of unplanned pregnancy—interlocking systems that help explain why a young woman like Irene Vilar would declare: “Not knowing how a [birth control] pill or a handful of them would affect my fertility, my days took on a balancing act” (Vilar 204).

There is evidence in *Impossible Motherhood* to suggest that Vilar’s metaphor of addiction suppresses material circumstances related to her youth, lack of resources, unsupportive partner, and transient lifestyle that prohibited childbearing. For example, Vilar’s husband enjoyed a more powerful social standing not only in terms of age, gender, language-ability but also ethnicity, enabling his coercion of her into accepting not only his desire to remain childless but also his lack of responsibility for birth control. Readers also glimpse her youthful ignorance about birth control, her beliefs that it was her responsibility and should not get “in the way of a man’s pleasure,” (51) and her poor quality of healthcare in some instances due to condescending doctors and language barriers. As a result, her metaphor of repeat abortion as an addiction and her sense of personal shame efface the more salient problem of unplanned pregnancy and its causes, all of which can be linked to her ethnicity, economic class, and youth. In other words, her “maternal desire” is not hampered so much by a compulsion to abort but rather by the circumstances of her life and social constraints on the right to mother. Conversely, the text’s metaphor of motherhood as a “cure” from this addiction suppresses the material circumstances that enable her decision to take a pregnancy to term. While the text celebrates her decision to bear children as redeeming her from the shame of repeat abortion and the legacy of imperialist genocide inherited from her sterilized mother, it fails to acknowledge directly that Vilar occupies a different place in her life when she decides to bear a child: she is older, educated, has career, is married and settled in a house, and has a partner who wants children. Vilar ultimately rejects as fathers not only her itinerant, boat-dwelling first husband but the equally financially unstable man with whom she has an affair and becomes pregnant after her divorce: “[I asked] myself why on earth I had shared any part of my life with this adult child who hadn’t worked a day since I’d known him” (166). However, once in Colorado, in a house and married to a man with an established career, she achieves the circumstances that are deemed socially and personally acceptable to parent. In other words, Vilar’s sudden attention to her “maternal instinct” does not represent a “cure” as much as it reflects a decision born of economic stability and freedom. A shift in perspective reveals how the unacknowledged politics of class, age, ethnicity, and marital privilege in determining a woman’s right to motherhood free of shame underpin Vilar’s personal redemption.

In some ways Vilar's story is atypical of most repeat abortion patients in that, at the time of her repeat abortion experience, she was a teenager and childless. But in other ways, her story reflects the issues reported by the Guttmacher Institute: her repeat abortions originate in repeat unplanned pregnancies that result from complex relationships of power. Vilar's memoir casts her actions (initially to abort and later to give birth) using the rhetoric of "unnatural addiction" and "natural desire" in a way that obscures these relationships of power. While the memoir casts Vilar's actions as responses to urges, it also produces evidence of maternal decision-making in contexts of limited and then expanding options. I want to suggest that we see them as decisions that reflect maternal thinking (and not an "impossible" relationship to motherhood) and that negotiate situations of unequal social power.

Mommy-Memoir and Revision of Mothering/Motherhood

The stigmatization of women seeking abortion has been one of the greatest weapons in the antiabortion movement; with this reality in mind, readers can appreciate that *Impossible Motherhood* is a radical narrative that defies a shaming silence. As a rhetorical strategy toward a hostile audience, Vilar's text appropriates the conventions of the mommy memoir. As with other texts in this genre, this gesture authorizes a discussion of abortion by framing it within safe assurances of the primacy of motherhood in women's lives. The mommy memoir form and conventions make *Impossible Motherhood* recognizable and palatable to conservative values about gender and motherhood: in addition to naturalized notions of gender and mothering (evidenced in the language of "urges" and "instincts"), the text also cast motherhood as women's most important role and the primacy of the child. Through reliance on these tenets of the New Momism, *Impossible Motherhood* appeals to a conservative audience that is hostile to abortion and other forms of gender equality.

As feminist critics of the genre have argued, the mommy memoir relies heavily on bio-essentialist ideas about gender difference, and these ideas serve to reinforce gender inequality regardless of the feminist intentions of the authors in the genre. This criticism, I argue, applies to *Impossible Motherhood*. Vilar's language of "instincts" and "addictions" not only restigmatizes abortion (through its association with heroin addiction) but also buries her material circumstances and agency, and readers lose sight of how her decisions to abort take place in the context of intersecting forces of sexism, racism, and ageism. This essay attempts to recover these details in order to expose the limitations of the mommy memoir genre in narrating abortion experience. My purpose in laying bare the shortcomings of the genre, though, should not diminish appreciation for the contributions of this text. *Impossible Motherhood* not only

tells the unpopular story of repeat abortion, it also reveals a different pathway to motherhood, through unplanned pregnancy, sexist exploitation, poverty, colonialism, and ageism. In this sense Vilar's work makes an important and possibly transformative contribution to this genre.

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