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Jane Roe Gone Rogue:
Norma McCorvey's Transformation as a Symbol
of the U.S. Abortion Debate

Christianna K. Barnard
Master of Arts in Women's History

Submitted in partial completion
of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College
May 2018

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I've always *hated* Jane Roe.

—Norma McCorvey

Abstract

This thesis explores the evolution of Norma McCorvey (1947-2017), better known as “Jane Roe” of *Roe v. Wade*, as a symbol of the United States abortion debate. I trace her life from her childhood through her death, examining her decision to become the *Roe* plaintiff, rise to fame as a symbol of the pro-choice movement, defection to the pro-life movement, subsequent attempts to reverse the *Roe* decision, and memorializations by various political figures and media outlets. I examine the role that her poverty, education, non-normative sexuality, and whiteness played in the public construction of her as an unreliable figurehead. To make sense of her unconventional political trajectory as well as the spectacularizing media attention she drew over the course of her life, I engage with journalistic and scholarly writing about her, her two co-authored memoirs, and audiovisual representations of her life and activist work. Ultimately, I contest the caricaturization of McCorvey as “the ultimate victim,” a financial opportunist, and “white trash” by contextualizing the challenges she faced due to her class, sexuality, and the shifting rhetoric on abortion between 1970-2017.

Acknowledgements

Over the past year, my obsession with Norma McCorvey has seeped into every corner of my life. I've earnestly proposed the idea of an abortion memorial research/ road trip to friends as a summer adventure, spent hours trying to figure out how to make a facsimile of one of McCorvey's political parody T-shirts (see Appendix figure 11), and managed to break all social norms by bringing up the history of reproductive rights with pretty much everyone I meet.

I am tremendously grateful for the incredible (and patient) team of mentors, peers, friends, and family who have encouraged me, listened to me externally process every last detail from my chapter titles to my footnotes, and laughed (or grimaced) at all of my tasteless puns.

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I am indebted to the reference librarians at Sarah Lawrence College as well as the librarians in the New York Public Library Microfilm Reading Room for their assistance with my research. Special thanks go to Kelleen Maluski, who expertly located several of the primary sources that shape my first and third chapters. I am also deeply grateful for the insights of Rev. Flip Benham, who graciously shared his personal memories of Norma McCorvey with me.

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And finally, to Nick. As I write this, I have a vivid memory of sitting in a noisy bar in Rittenhouse Square with you some three summers ago, listening to you talk about your work and thinking that it would be silly for me to study anything I cared about less than you did about film. I wonder if I would have pursued this degree in the first place if I hadn't met you then. I'm glad I don't know the answer, and profoundly thankful for your encouragement, intellect, and love throughout this tumultuous and wonderful journey.

Jane Roe Gone Rogue:

Norma McCorvey’s Transformation as a Symbol of the U.S. Abortion Debate

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Preface | “Pixie”: Norma McCorvey before *Roe v. Wade*, 1947-1970

It is difficult to imagine a woman who embodied more contradictions than Norma McCorvey. A Jehovah’s Witness during her childhood and self-proclaimed “heathen” during her twenties, she converted to Christianity not once, but twice: first in a highly publicized Evangelical ceremony, later into Roman Catholicism. An out lesbian known for playing up her femme or butchness depending on the woman she was pursuing, she had children with three different men, later renouncing all sexual activity for a purportedly celibate lifestyle. But central to her life was the greatest discrepancy of all: she was “Jane Roe,” the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade*, yet she dedicated the final twenty-two years of her life fighting the Supreme Court’s *Roe* decision— a ruling which she never benefited from given that she never received an abortion.

McCorvey’s ideological conversion is all the more fascinating as it was not an isolated incident. *Roe v. Wade* was tried in the Supreme Court alongside another case, *Doe v. Bolton*, the product of lawyer Margie Pitts Hames’s crusade against what she referred to as Georgia’s “cumbersome, costly, and time consuming” abortion restrictions.¹ Like *Roe v. Wade*, Hames and the legal team behind *Doe v. Bolton* protected their pregnant plaintiff by assigning her a pseudonym: “Mary Doe.” “Mary Doe,” whose real name was Sandra Cano (then Sandra Bensing, later also referred to as Sandra Bensing-Cano), was, like McCorvey, a white woman living in poverty. Estranged from her abusive husband, she had already given birth to two children whom she lost custody of when they were toddlers.² Neither Cano nor McCorvey ever testified or appeared in court, but their affidavits were central documents in their respective

¹ N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Roe V. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 159.

² Mark Curriden, "Doe vs. Bolton: Mary Doe Has a Change of Heart, Pickets Abortion Clinics," *American Bar Association Journal* 75, no. 7 (1989): 26; David J. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade*, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 426-427, 444-447, 465, 497.

cases.³ In 1989, eight years before McCorvey's conversion, Cano became an activist with Operation Rescue. Additionally, she claimed that she never wanted an abortion, but rather, had been duped by Hames and forced to sign the affidavit without understanding its significance.⁴

While both women became icons of the pro-life movement, there is another key divide between them. As *Roe* became synonymous with legalized abortion, McCorvey's story would become a matter of public fascination for decades, while Cano's life would be nearly forgotten. Both contributed to public discourse on abortion, but where McCorvey's appearances and actions have left behind a rich archive, Cano has left mere breadcrumbs. Regardless, both have largely gone ignored by feminist scholars and historians, turned into footnotes in a history that could not have happened without them.

This thesis will center on the evolution of Norma McCorvey as a symbol of the United States' abortion debate. It is not a biography; however, in order to make sense of the ways that McCorvey used and retold her own story to further the political agendas of both the pro-choice and pro-life movements, it is necessary to have a sense of the overall arc of her life.⁵ Throughout this work, I will engage with McCorvey's self-creation and transformation by others into a political symbol after the 1973 *Roe* decision, through her death in 2017 and subsequent

³ Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 97-99; Brief of Sandra Cano, the Former "Mary Doe" of *Doe v. Bolton*, and the 180 Women Injured by Abortion as Amicus Curie at in Support of Petitioner, *Gonzales v. Carhart*, 550 U.S. 124, 3 (2007) (No. 05-380).

⁴ Curriden, "Doe vs. Bolton," 26.

⁵ While many feminist scholars opt to use the term "anti-abortion" to refer to those opposed to legalized abortion, I will use the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" throughout this work to refer to the two polarized positions on abortion that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. "Pro-life" was the term that Norma McCorvey used to refer to her position on abortion after her conversion, and out of respect for her, I think it is important to reflect her preferred terminology. Secondly, a large number of the sources I will deal with in this text are propagandistic in nature, representing both the views of radical pro-life and pro-choice activists. In these texts, partisan lines are clearly drawn through the terminology which an author uses, such as the use of the word "antis" in pro-life and pro-choice to refer to those holding the opposite position from one's own. I have found that deviating from the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" can pose confusion for the reader, particularly in sections comparing the rhetoric of the two movements.

memorializations by left and right-wing media and political figures, keeping an eye on Sandra Cano's life and pro-life efforts throughout.

As the bulk of material on McCorvey is politicized, if not outright propagandistic, constructing an objective account of her life is difficult. Nevertheless, such a starting point is necessary if one is to understand the ways in which her life story was manipulated and retold to further the platforms of the pro-choice and pro-life movements. In this preface, I construct a biographical sketch of McCorvey's life before she became the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade* in order to provide context for the comparative study of the many accounts of her life which will follow.

Clarification, however, is only part of my intervention. Throughout my research process, I have been haunted by the question: does Norma McCorvey's personal story matter? From a legal standpoint, she served her role. As of the time I am writing this, the Supreme Court's *Roe* decision, despite decades of legislative and judicial battering, still stands. McCorvey was by no means the mastermind behind this case. Like Cano and many other test case plaintiffs, she became enmeshed in the legal system through a combination of circumstance, timing, and the artful strategy of a determined team of activists and lawyers.⁶ She was, by her own admission, "a rough woman, born into pain and anger and raised mostly by [her]self."⁷

⁶ A few notable counterpoints to Norma McCorvey are the Brown family of *Brown v. Board of Education*, John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner of *Lawrence v. Texas*, and Edith Windsor of *United States v. Windsor*. While all of these plaintiffs won landmark civil rights cases, the legal strategists in each case often obscured uncomfortable facts about their eponymous litigants. For example, the lawyers in *United States v. Windsor* forbade the outspoken Edith Windsor from speaking about her and her late partner's "butch-femme escapades," and the lawyers of *Lawrence v. Texas* hid the fact that their clients claimed they were not engaged in a sex act at the time that they were arrested for sodomy. Linda Brown of *Brown v. Board of Education* reported in 1985 that the segregated school which she attended as a child was "a very good school...as far as quality [was] concerned," and that her family's objection to the school was the distance that she had to travel to attend it. See Ariel Levy, "The Perfect Wife," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-perfect-wife>; Jad Abumrad and Katherine Wells, "The Imperfect Plaintiffs," *More Perfect*, podcast audio, June 28, 2016, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/more-perfect-plaintiffs/>; and "Interview with Linda Brown Smith," conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 26, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

⁷ Norma McCorvey and Andy Meisler, *I am Roe: My Life, Roe v. Wade, and Freedom of Choice* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 2-3.

Nevertheless, McCorvey's life and pregnancy formed the basis of one of the most important reproductive rights decisions in the twentieth century. The silences and misrepresentations that haunt her story in the scholarly record are not flukes: they are indications are deeper cracks that began to erode the pro-choice platform's ideological foundation long before Norma McCorvey became Jane Roe. In this thesis, I hope to complicate these cracks and fissures by reviving the voice of a woman who too-often has been flattened into the role of victim or villain by scholars, activists, and the media alike.

Norma Leah McCorvey (née Nelson) was born in 1947 to a white, "part Cajun, part Cherokee Indian" family in Lettsworth, Louisiana.⁸ Her father, Olin "Jimmy" Nelson was a World War II veteran, and her mother, Mary Mildred, was a waitress.⁹ As an adult, McCorvey had a sense that she had existed on the margins of American society since her childhood: "I suppose that in a way I was living in an entirely different country than other children my age—the ones who were riding school busses and watching television and wearing Davy Crockett hats."¹⁰ She described her childhood world as a space of religious syncretism, as her father was a Jehovah's Witness but she felt closely connected to a matriarchal, folk spirituality "passed down

⁸ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 11; Alex Witchel, "At Home with: Norma McCorvey; Of Roe, Dreams and Choices," *New York Times*, July 28, 1994. There is debate surrounding the facticity of this memoir, which McCorvey co-wrote with freelance reporter Andy Meisler. Historian David J. Garrow dismissed the book as factually inaccurate in the third edition of *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade*, and McCorvey's former partner, Connie Gonzales, later claimed that a shooting which McCorvey reports in the book never occurred. When possible, I have corroborated McCorvey's account in this text by including other sources. However, *I am Roe* is by far the most thorough account of McCorvey's life between the years of 1947-1994. Due to the scarcity of sources on McCorvey's childhood and adolescence, I have chosen to use it despite its suspected factual shortcomings in order to better contextualize the discussion of McCorvey as a political symbol which is to follow. For further discussion of the representation of McCorvey as a pro-choice icon in *I am Roe* and the critical reception of the book, see Chapter 2. For more information on Garrow's treatment of McCorvey in *Liberty and Sexuality*, see the Introduction. David J. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: the Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade* 3rd ed., (Newburyport: Open Road Media, 2015), 2014-2015; Joshua Prager, "The Accidental Activist," *Vanity Fair Hive*, February 2013, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/norma-mccorvey-roe-v-wade-abortion>.

⁹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 11-12, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14. Davy Crockett hats were popular to the point of being considered an "international mania" among children in the 1950s. Dwight Blocker Bowers, "The Saga of Davy Crockett's Coonskin Cap," *O Say Can You See: Stories from the National Museum of American History*, November 17, 2014, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/saga-davy-crocketts-coonskin-cap>.

from grandmother to mother to daughter.”¹¹ The heart of social life of her Cajun town comprised of “running the road,” a term her community used to refer to the practice of visiting neighbors to gossip and drink alcohol and strong cups of French coffee.¹²

When McCorvey was in elementary school, her parents separated and she moved to Dallas with her mother and her older brother Jimmy, whom she helped care for as he had a developmental disability.¹³ Here, a friend nicknamed her “Pixie” due to her short stature and impish mannerisms.¹⁴ In order to avoid her abusive mother, McCorvey began working at a gas station at the age of ten. That same year, she ran away to Oklahoma City with a female friend, with whom she had a romantic encounter. The two were caught, and McCorvey was sent away to a Catholic boarding school, where she was raped by a novice nun.¹⁵

McCorvey’s adolescence was marked by cycles of incarceration, sexual violence, and instability. Between the ages of 11 and 15, she was repeatedly sent to the State School in Gainesville, Texas, a juvenile detention facility, where she had a series of affairs with other female students. This school freed the young woman to explore her sexuality and find community, so much so that she intentionally broke the law in order to return. When she was 15, her caseworker at Gainesville warned her that, due to her age and repeated infractions, she would be sent to an adult detention facility if she committed further legal offenses. She returned to Dallas, where her mother sent her to live with a distant relative. He repeatedly sexually assaulted her, and when her mother found out, she brought Norma back home to live with her and her new husband.¹⁶

¹¹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18-19, 15.

¹⁴ Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

¹⁵ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 24-29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-41. There is no evidence that either the nun or this unnamed family member who sexually assaulted McCorvey ever faced legal, professional, or social ramifications for their actions.

McCorvey sought employment and began to work as a roller-skating waitress at a carhop. Here, she met the 24-year old Ellwood “Woody” McCorvey, who propositioned her through lewd innuendo and eventually became her boyfriend. The two married on June 17, 1964 when Norma was only 16 years old.¹⁷ They moved to Pasadena, California so that Woody could pursue employment at a family sheet metal business, but then decided to relocate to Hollywood to escape conflict with Woody’s family and so that Norma could chase her dreams of becoming a Hollywood star, an aspiration that Woody’s mother had encouraged her to pursue. After a tense period during which both were jobless, Woody found work at a factory and Norma discovered that she was pregnant. She prepared a meal of the most decadent food she could afford— “a Chef Boy-R-Dee [sic] spaghetti dinner, about thirty-cents' worth of chopped beef, and a head of lettuce”—and informed her husband of her pregnancy.¹⁸ Woody, who had been married before, thought he was infertile. He beat and berated Norma, accusing her of cheating on him.¹⁹ The police intervened and a friend helped finance Norma’s return to Dallas.²⁰

In May of 1965, McCorvey gave birth to her first daughter, Melissa. The eighteen-year old McCorvey lived with her mother and her mother’s new husband, Raymond, during this time; however, tensions erupted when Mary discovered her daughter’s relationships with women. Allegedly, Mary manipulated Norma into giving her custody of Melissa.²¹ The devastated McCorvey became an alcoholic.²² For the next four years, she primarily worked as a bartender in Dallas-area gay bars. She eventually obtained a more stable position as a respiratory therapist at Baylor University Hospital through a girlfriend, but while employed there she had an affair with

¹⁷ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 47; Joseph N. Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” *Good Housekeeping* 176 Iss. 6 (New York) June 1973, 78.

¹⁸ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 53; Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong, “The Woman Behind Roe v. Wade.” *People Magazine* 30, no. 20, May 22, 1989.

¹⁹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe.*, 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62, 64-65, 77-81; Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

²² McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 78.

a male coworker and became pregnant. As she was unwed, she lost her job.²³ Accounts of the birth of her second child vary, but in most, she states that she allowed the child's father full custody and neither of the two encountered McCorvey again.²⁴

McCorvey returned to the Dallas lesbian scene, managing dancers at a go-go club that catered to both gay women and straight men. There, she began using and selling LSD and prescription weight-loss drugs, which led to her being fired.²⁵ She continued selling drugs and got involved in a pool tournament circuit along with a male acquaintance who became her billiards teammate and lover. While traveling together to a tournament, McCorvey asked him to leave her in Louisiana with her mother so that she could spend some time visiting Melissa, then four years old. The visit was short-lived due to a flare-up of old resentments between McCorvey and her mother, Mary. McCorvey left and began working as a barker for a carnival's freakshow. Initially, she enjoyed the job, experiencing a kinship with the animals. As she recalled in *I am Roe*, "...I felt as if we all had something in common. We were all freaks of nature."²⁶ This job would be short-lived, as around this time, McCorvey discovered that she was pregnant once again.²⁷

With only \$30 to her name, McCorvey was terrified and unsure of where to turn. A friend in Dallas lent her the money to buy a Greyhound ticket home. The trip home was a particularly low moment for McCorvey, who later recalled that she was stopped by a guard and threatened

²³ The exact year of this event is unknown; however, it occurred sometime between the birth of Melissa in 1965 and McCorvey's third pregnancy in 1969. Job loss due to premarital pregnancy was common at this time, particularly for working class women. For further information on the social and professional ramifications of illegitimate pregnancy at this time, see Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Suzy: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 84-85.

²⁴ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe.*, 81-87, Ilene and Meaghan O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, performed by Norma McCorvey and Connie Gonzales, New York: Cinemax Reel Life, 1998; Green and Armstrong, "The Woman Behind Roe v. Wade."

²⁵ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 87-91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92-100 (1995); David J. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade*, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 403

with arrest for bathing in a public restroom between stops.²⁸ When she arrived in Dallas, she spent several days wandering around the Greyhound station, deeply depressed. Eventually, she broke down and called the number of a gay bar she used to frequent, and the manager sent Jinx, a regular at the bar, to pick McCorvey up.²⁹

The other regulars at the bar were able to provide McCorvey with some financial support and stability as her pregnancy progressed. But one offered a suggestion that unintentionally changed the course of McCorvey's life: she brought up the idea that McCorvey seek out an abortion, a procedure which was illegal in Texas in 1969. McCorvey, who had no desire to give birth to yet another child she could not raise, leaped at the possibility. She contacted Dr. Richard Allen Lane, a Dallas-area osteopath, and asked if he could perform the procedure. After informing McCorvey of its illegality, the doctor referred her to an adoption lawyer.³⁰ The lawyer and McCorvey had a fraught meeting. He asked about the details of the conception, and McCorvey claimed to have been raped in hopes that she would be able to have an abortion in these circumstances. He then pressed her to identify the race of the father, but she could not.

As McCorvey later reported in her memoir *I am Roe*, the lawyer clearly assumed that her alleged rapist had been a man of color as he called Dr. Lane to tell him that McCorvey's baby "would be hard to place with white parents."³¹ McCorvey entreated Dr. Lane once again for help on finding someone who would help her get an abortion, and he referred her to a second lawyer:

²⁸ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 100-101; Bell, "A Landmark Decision," 150.

²⁹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 102.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-107; Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 402.

³¹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe.*, 109. This alarming statement, made in 1969, is indicative of still-simmering racial tensions in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, assumptions about the link between violent sexual crime and the race of alleged perpetrators, and the racial politics of adoption. For more information on the racialized history of the "primitive rapist," see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Race and Gender in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For more information on transracial adoption in United States (particularly in regard to the adoption of black children by white parents), see Christine Ward Galley, *Blue Ribbon Babies: Race, Class, and Gender in U.S. Adoption Practice*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

Henry McCluskey. McCluskey, whose cases consisted of a combination of criminal work and arranging adoptions, had recently won *Alvin L. Buchanan v. Charles Batchelor*, a case challenging Texas's sodomy statute.³² He had a much better rapport with the now nearly three-months pregnant McCorvey. While McCluskey attempted to persuade McCorvey to put her child up for adoption, she was forthcoming with him about her desire for an abortion. In McCorvey, McCluskey saw an opportunity to aid a colleague who had formerly helped him. Linda Coffee, a young lawyer and good friend of his, had provided him with assistance during the *Buchanan* trial. Coffee and Sarah Weddington, a friend who had also studied at the Law School of the University of Texas, were attempting to abolish through a lawsuit the very law that prohibited McCorvey from getting an abortion. However, they needed a pregnant woman who would agree to sign on as their plaintiff in order to effectively sue the state of Texas.³³

In the meantime, McCorvey refused to accept defeat. She went to an illegal abortion clinic, which a receptionist at a health clinic had told her about. This experience did not result in McCorvey receiving an abortion, much to her disappointment. The clinic had been shut down in a police raid and all that was left was a horrifying crime scene. As she remembered in *I am Roe*, “the table was dirty. Filthy. So was the whole office. There was dried blood on the floor. And on the examining table. Regular tables and chairs and filing cabinets were scattered on the floor, overturned as if there had been a big fight minutes ago.”³⁴ Another door closed to her, McCorvey eagerly accepted McCluskey's invitation to meet with Coffee in hopes that she and Weddington would finally help her receive the relief she needed. And so, Norma McCorvey, former carnie,

³² Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 397-398, 402; McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 111-113, Prager, “The Accidental Activist.” McCluskey's challenge to Texas's sodomy laws was fueled by McCluskey's own commitment to the rights of queer Texans as he himself was gay. McCluskey was tragically murdered in 1973, the same year as the *Roe* Supreme Court decision, by a man who is assumed to have been a former lover. See Prager, “The Accidental Activist”; *I am Roe*, 112.

³³ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 400, 404.

³⁴ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 114.

drug-dealer, carhop, and mother of two children took a step towards her first political transformation: her body and pregnancy became not merely a personal dilemma, but a stand-in for all women in United States who were or might become pregnant.

Introduction | The Marginalized Woman at the Center of the Abortion Debate

If a viewer happened to tune into the evening news at the wrong moment in August of 1995, they might think that they were watching the rebroadcast of a murder. They would see a middle-aged woman with close-cropped hair standing in a pool, clad in a white tank top and denim overalls. A more formally-attired man dressed in a button-up shirt and khakis holds her by the back with his left hand.³⁵ With the right, he covers her face with a pale-pink hand towel, effectively blocking off her breathing-passages and shrouding her wide-eyed countenance from view. She does not resist the man—a signal of resignation, perhaps, as his broad frame dwarfs her petite body. Hands clasped as if in prayer, she succumbs to his force as he submerges her in the pale pool water. She remains there, limp.

Any suspected foul play, however, would be cut mercifully short. For only moments later, the man pulls her back into the sweltering summer air and proclaims, “Hallelujah! Here she is! The old is gone; the old is buried and the new has come alive in Christ. My brothers and sisters, Miss Norma Leah McCorvey, born again Christian.”³⁶ The baptism of Norma McCorvey, better known as Jane Roe of the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* (1973), by Operation Rescue director Flip Benham, marked the end of one way of life and the advent of the new.³⁷ In a sense,

³⁵ See Appendix figure 1.

³⁶ See Appendix figure 2; Ilene Findler and Meaghan O’Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, performed by Norma McCorvey and Connie Gonzales, New York: Cinemax Reel Life, 1998.

³⁷ Operation Rescue (OR), an Evangelical pro-life organization founded by Randall Terry in 1986 or 1987 (sources differ on the exact year), became a media fixture in the late 1980s through the early 1990s because of its “rescues” of abortion clinics. Rescues took on various forms, but usually included blockades of clinic entrances as protesters would use their bodies to prevent women and clinic workers from entering the building. Around its peak in 1990, the movement’s leaders claimed that around 35,000 rescuers had been arrested while 16,000 others had risked arrest because of their involvement in OR protests. In 1993 and 1994, OR lost several lawsuits and was fined extensively, and new legislation imposed steeper penalties against protesters who blocked clinic entrances, thus restricting both the tactics and financial basis of the organization. Violent acts against abortion clinic workers in 1993 caused infighting among OR members as well. After Terry stepped down in 1993, Rev. Phillip “Flip” Benham took over leadership of the organization and moved the headquarters to Dallas. As the leader of OR, Benham was responsible for moving the OR headquarters next-door to the abortion clinic where Norma McCorvey worked in 1995 and rebranding the failing organization as Operation Save America. OSA’s mission extends beyond pro-life activism, including anti-LGBTQ and anti-Islamic protests. OR will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3. For more on the

reading this scene as a death would hold a grain of truth. Within the chlorinated baptismal waters of a backyard pool, the persona which McCorvey had worn on-and-off since the *Roe* decision was figuratively drowned. As Norma McCorvey herself proclaimed less than a year later, “On August 8, 1995, Jane Roe died.”³⁸ In her place, McCorvey took on a new religious practice, eventually fusing her new spiritual beliefs with the political mission of reversing the Supreme Court decision that had irrevocably altered her life. The event provoked a frenzied public discourse.³⁹ What could have compelled the woman whose legal pseudonym functioned as shorthand for a women’s right to an abortion to turn her back on that very movement? How could she waltz, with a smile on her face and tears in her eyes, into the arms of a group that prided itself on shutting down abortion clinics through militant acts of civil disobedience?

McCorvey’s conversion invited sensationalization. Operation Rescue asked a local TV news crew to broadcast the event, and the story was picked up by media outlets across the country.⁴⁰ A few days later, McCorvey was interviewed by Ted Koppel on *Nightline* in an extended segment on what her conversion meant for the abortion debate. During the interview, she asserted that, despite her conversion, she still supported abortions in the first trimester.⁴¹ Following her conversion and later adoption of a pro-life stance, many within the mainstream

history of Operation Rescue, see Faye D. Ginsburg, “Rescuing the Nation: Operation Rescue and the Rise of Anti-Abortion Militance,” in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*, edited by Rickie Solinger, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 229-242; Mark Allan Steiner, *The Rhetoric of Operation Rescue: Projecting the Christian Pro-Life Message* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 5-12; Daniel K. Williams, “The Partisan Trajectory of the American Pro-Life Movement: How a Liberal Catholic Campaign became a Conservative Evangelical Cause,” *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 451-475; and Karissa Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 92-97.

³⁸ Findler and O’Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*.

³⁹ For a few notable examples, see “Jane Roe Joins Anti-Abortion Group,” *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1995; Lynn Smith, “A Woman’s Right to Change her Mind,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 15, 1995; “Norma vs. Jane vs. Roe vs. Wade,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug 21, 1995; Mark A. Kellner, “Jane Roe Plaintiff Joins Pro-Life Movement,” *Christianity Today* 39, no. 10, September 1, 1995.

⁴⁰ Phone interview with Flip Benham, October 2017.

⁴¹ Ted Koppel and Norma McCorvey, *Nightline*, American Broadcasting Company, August 10, 1995.

pro-choice movement found it best to simply dismiss her, including her former lawyer Sarah Weddington, who claimed that “all Jane Roe ever did was sign a one-page legal affidavit.”⁴²

This flattening of the complexities of McCorvey’s conversion and role in *Roe* was hardly an unusual situation for the former plaintiff. Throughout Norma McCorvey’s life as a public figure, she was considered unreliable, leading many acquaintances and journalists to depict her as a caricature of herself. In 1992, while she was working as a pro-choice activist with the Jane Roe Foundation, a colleague referred to her as “the ultimate victim.”⁴³ Marsha King, another intended *Roe* plaintiff who was found to lack the legal ground to sue the state of Texas when the case was brought to the Supreme Court, called her “a lost little soul.”⁴⁴ Her longtime partner Connie Gonzales, whom McCorvey eventually abandoned after Gonzales suffered a stroke, described her as “a phony.”⁴⁵

While these descriptors were not entirely undeserved, they do not do justice to the ways in which McCorvey contributed to the public construction of herself as a figurehead of the pro-choice and pro-life movements between 1973 and 2017. Furthermore, the oversimplification of Norma McCorvey by activists, journalists, and scholars has effectively obscured the interplay between McCorvey’s shifting role as a symbol of the abortion debate and the evolution of pro-choice and pro-life discourse in the wake of the *Roe* decision. In this thesis, I will examine McCorvey’s status as the public face of the pro-choice and the pro-life movements, delving into

⁴² Ted Koppel and Norma McCorvey, *Nightline*, American Broadcasting Company, August 10, 1995.

⁴³ S.J. Diamond, “Where Are They Now? A drifter, a deadbeat and an intensely private doctor,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1992. McCorvey’s pro-choice activism does not lend itself to clear periodization as she slipped in and out of the spotlight at various moments between 1973 and 1984. However, she became widely known as the “Jane Roe” of *Roe v. Wade* and worked regularly for the movement between 1984 and 1995. Her reticence to be associated with the movement, public identifications with *Roe* before 1984, and her early pro-choice activism are addressed in Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 402.

⁴⁵ Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

the roles that class, racial, and sexual identity, as well as broader shifts in abortion rhetoric played in the life of its central plaintiff.

Even a cursory investigation into McCorvey's life reveals that she left behind a treasure trove for future researchers. She was the subject of magazine profiles, newspaper articles, and appeared in several documentaries.⁴⁶ Several nonprofits, including the Jane Roe Foundation and Roe No More Ministries, depended on her for fundraising and public appearances.⁴⁷ As a pro-choice activist, she appeared with her then-lawyer Gloria Allred and a number of prominent feminist leaders at the confirmation hearing of Supreme Court Justice David Souter.⁴⁸ Following her defection to the pro-life cause, she attempted to reopen the *Roe* case in order to reverse the Supreme Court's ruling, testified at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, and worked with the Justice Foundation, which was responsible for submitting a crucial amicus brief in the 2007 Supreme Court case *Gonzales v. Carhart*.⁴⁹ While sources proliferate around the time of McCorvey's baptism, this event was not her final metamorphosis. In August of 1998, McCorvey was reborn once again as a Roman Catholic, becoming a prominent figure in the denomination's

⁴⁶ For a sampling, see the following: Joseph N. Bell, "A Landmark Decision," *Good Housekeeping* 176 Iss. 6 (New York) June 1973; Lisa Belkin, "Woman Behind the Symbols in Abortion Debate," *New York Times*, May 9, 1989; Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong, "The Woman Behind Roe v. Wade," *People Magazine* 30, no. 20, May 22, 1989; Joseph N. Bell, "Jane Roe Settles into Life of her Own," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1990; S.J. Diamond, "Where Are They Now?," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1992; Joseph N. Bell, "Caught In The Spotlight Of Roe V. Wade," *Sun Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), Oct. 25, 1992; Debbie Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," *Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 30, 1996; Ilene Findler and Meaghan O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, performed by Norma McCorvey and Connie Gonzales, New York: Cinemax Reel Life, 1998; *Lake of Fire*, directed by Tony Kaye (2006; New York City: TH!NKFilm), DVD; Joshua Prager, "The Accidental Activist," *Vanity Fair Hive*, February, 2013, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/norma-mccorvey-roe-v-wade-abortion>.

⁴⁷ S.J. Diamond, "Where Are They Now?" "Roe No More Ministry," *Real News 24/7*, Updated March 3, 2003; http://realnews247.com/roe_no_more.htm. The website for "Roe No More" ministry can be found at the above address; the Jane Roe Foundation appears to have never had a website due to its dissolution in the early 1990s.

⁴⁸ Due to the Supreme Court's involvement in deciding a number of landmark cases related to the constitutionality of abortion, questions about abortion are often a central feature in Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Souter's nomination was unique as the actual "Jane Roe" of *Roe v. Wade* was present. For a more recent example of this fraught line of questioning, see Matt Ford, "Gorsuch: Roe v. Wade Is the 'Law of the Land'," *The Atlantic* (Boston, MA), Mar 22, 2017.

⁴⁹ Linda Boston Schlueter et al., *Brief of Sandra Cano, the Former "Mary Doe" of Doe v. Bolton, and 180 Women Injured by Abortion as Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioner*, No. 05-380 (August 12, 2003), app. 2. Cano's history as a plaintiff will be explored in chapter 1, and this amicus brief will be discussed in chapter 3. There is no relation between the "Gonzales" of *Gonzales v. Carhart* and McCorvey's long-time partner Connie Gonzales.

pro-life ranks.⁵⁰ She agitated against politicians that supported abortion, including Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.⁵¹

Considering the symbolic role that both McCorvey and the *Roe* case have played in the abortion debate, the scant historical writing on McCorvey in histories of *Roe* and the subsequent escalation of the abortion debate is surprising. While her central role has not been forgotten, it has not been the subject of intensive historical inquiry in the four decades since *Roe* was decided. McCorvey (as Jane Roe) makes an early appearance in James C. Mohr's *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (1978). This legal history tracks the evolution of abortion as a tacitly accepted practice at the turn of the nineteenth century to a staunchly forbidden one in the early 1900s. Mohr uses the recent *Roe* decision as the centerpiece of the afterword in the text, examining the ways in which the decision undid much of the legal reasoning which he charts in the text which precedes this section. Mohr mentions Jane Roe fleetingly, a decision which is justified by his assertion that “the basic outlines of the *Roe* case are well-known.”⁵² The information he does provide—that the plaintiff was an unwed mother in Texas who sued the Dallas District Attorney in 1970—is accurate but reflective of the minimal information known about McCorvey in the public sphere at this time.⁵³

David J. Garrow's landmark text, *Liberty and Sexuality: the Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade* (1994) expands upon the work that Mohr began at the end of his text. In this lengthy volume, Garrow constructs a legal history of *Roe v. Wade*, pinpointing its roots within the broader context of reproductive rights-related legislation and the rise of the “right to

⁵⁰ Norma McCorvey with Fr. Frank Pavone, “My Journey into the Catholic Church”, *Priests for Life: Educational Resources*, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/brochures/myjourney.htm>.

⁵¹ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*; Paul Kane, “‘Jane Roe’ Arrested at Supreme Court Hearing,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2009; Robert D. McFadden, “Norma McCorvey, ‘Roe’ in *Roe v. Wade*, Is Dead at 69,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2017.

⁵² James C. Mohr, *Abortion in America: The Origins and Evolution of National Policy, 1800-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 246-247.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

privacy.” He traces the issue of legalized abortion from the 1930s through 1990s, meticulously outlining the legal decisions, players, and events that paved the way for the *Roe* decision and its aftermath.

The care that Garrow demonstrates for *Roe*’s legal forbearers, however, is not always extended to the case’s plaintiff. Norma McCorvey’s role is included in the historical narrative; however, she is treated with a sense of disinterest at best and disdain at worst. In his first mention of McCorvey, a summary of her 1969 meeting with Linda Coffee’s friend Henry McCluskey, Garrow immediately highlights her youth and physical appearance, calling her a “tiny twenty-two year old.”⁵⁴ Later, he notes Coffee’s surprise at “how small— and how visibly pregnant” McCorvey looked during their initial meeting.⁵⁵ His depiction of McCorvey erases much of the emotional turmoil she experienced in her earlier pregnancies. He makes only a fleeting mention of the McCorvey’s mother’s custody of her first child, Melissa, and claims that she “happily” gave up her second child for adoption.⁵⁶

Garrow was not oblivious to the strained relationship between McCorvey and her lawyers, as he remarks that Sarah Weddington later grew “highly dismissive” of McCorvey’s involvement in the case.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, he uses the voices of those around McCorvey, such as Marsha King, another of the case’s plaintiffs, to diminish her in turn. In his last mention of McCorvey in the text, he quotes King, who remarks that “it made me sad to think of her.”⁵⁸ This infantilizing attitude towards McCorvey remains constant in subsequent editions of the text, including the third edition (2015), in which Garrow dedicates a mere paragraph to McCorvey’s

⁵⁴ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 402.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 833 fn 59.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 601. While Marsha King was one of the plaintiffs in both the federal district court trial and Supreme Court trials, she was found to lack standing as she was not pregnant when the case was filed.

conversion, calling it “a publicity boost” for the pro-life movement and attributing McCorvey’s motivations to a vendetta against Sarah Weddington and a desire for attention and affection.⁵⁹

Shortly after McCorvey’s first conversion, James C. Mohr reentered the conversation to grapple with the impact of both McCorvey’s memoir, *I am Roe*, and Garrow’s *Liberty and Sexuality* on the historical discourse on *Roe*. In his 1996 literature review in the *Journal of Women’s History* entitled “Sexuality, Reproduction, Contraception, and Abortion: A Review of Recent Literature” he speaks positively of McCorvey’s contributions in *I am Roe*, calling her recollections in the book “wonderful.” He is clearly less impressed by Garrow’s *Liberty and Sexuality*, noting that the text is “excessively personalistic, sometimes gossipy.”⁶⁰ Mohr states that Garrow’s text, which is governed by the idea that the legalization of abortion was determined by “elite progressive legalists” operating “primarily behind the scenes and in courtrooms,” is “a dangerous model.”⁶¹ Such a telling, Mohr argues, reduces massive social shifts to the acts of a few, brave, “lionized” individuals.⁶²

Mohr builds upon this argument in his comparison of McCorvey and Garrow’s texts. He notes that, in McCorvey’s telling, the lawyers are depicted as “manipulative,” unlike the “daring champions of virtue” that Garrow celebrates. Mohr is not oblivious of McCorvey and Meisler’s tendency to counteract the elitism in academic writings on *Roe* by playing up “the literary affectation of love and stability among... supposed deviants,” particularly in McCorvey’s recounting of her time in juvenile carceral facilities.⁶³ Nevertheless, Mohr emphasizes the importance of McCorvey’s contribution to the historical record, “especially in view of

⁵⁹ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 647

⁶⁰ James C. Mohr, “Sexuality, Reproduction, Contraception, and Abortion: A Review of Recent Literature,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 1 (1996), 181.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 183.

McCorvey's post-publication shift toward the right-to-life cause.”⁶⁴ This statement stands out as Mohr amplifies his support for McCorvey’s voice and perspective not despite, but in light of, her conversion and change in ideology.

N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer’s *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (2001) is a far more generalized history than Garrow’s legal tome. The two scholars contextualize *Roe* within its medical, societal, religious, and historical context, examining the abortion debate from an explicitly non-partisan stance. While McCorvey is not the focus of the text, they clearly demonstrate her importance within both the case and its aftermath. McCorvey’s class and educational background are foregrounded in her first introduction, but these factors are conveyed without the elitism that pervades Garrow’s work.⁶⁵ Due to the breadth of the text, little other information about McCorvey is mentioned in this section. At the end of the text, they note McCorvey’s turn to pro-life activism and include references to the ministry she was the spokesperson for at the time of the text’s publication, Roe No More ministry.⁶⁶

Two works published in 2015, Joanna Schoen’s *Abortion after Roe* (2015) and Mary Ziegler’s *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* introduce new directions in scholarship on *Roe*’s effects on abortion law and practice. Both texts, however, contribute to the erasure of McCorvey from the history of legalized abortion through either misinformation or by omitting her entirely. Schoen’s *Abortion after Roe* is a feminist medical history that examines the effects of *Roe v. Wade* on abortion providers and women seeking abortion from the 1970s through the early 2000s. Schoen draws on extensive interviews with abortion providers, whom she sought out through the National Abortion Federation (a professional organization for

⁶⁴ Mohr, "Sexuality, Reproduction, Contraception, and Abortion,"184.

⁶⁵ N. E. H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Roe V. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 113.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

abortion clinic employees). She is attentive to the backlash to *Roe* throughout, which is evident through her incisive analysis of pro-life rhetoric.

As Norma McCorvey was an active player in the public debate on abortion during the decades which Schoen addresses, she is woven into the narrative at several points in the text. Schoen's treatment of McCorvey, however, is uneven. In places, her conversion and pro-life activism are detailed with diligence.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, McCorvey is misrepresented through factual error. In a chapter entitled "D&E and the Debate over Fetal Bodies," Schoen mentions McCorvey in connection to her activism with the pro-life group Women Exploited by Abortion (WEBA). She notes that this organization co-opted feminist rhetoric about the importance of personal narratives, harnessing these stories to perpetuate the idea that post-abortion regret was inevitable following an abortion. WEBA used these testimonies in the 1990s alongside Norma McCorvey and *Doe v. Bolton* plaintiff Sandra Cano's narratives in their attempts to overturn *Roe* and *Doe*.⁶⁸ While this is correct, Schoen states that McCorvey and Cano "now claimed to regret their abortions."⁶⁹ As neither woman received an abortion, this analysis overlooks the complicated personal histories behind both women's changes of heart.

In *After Roe*, legal scholar Mary Ziegler seeks to remedy an oversimplified understanding of the role of *Roe v. Wade* in reshaping the contemporary American abortion debate. Ziegler's historiographical intervention is twofold. First, she seeks to combat the myth that the legislative push for widespread, legal abortion access was, from its inception, linked to a women's rights agenda, dedicating significant attention to exploring the impact of zero-population growth ideology on the movement's early principles. Secondly, she demonstrates that the pro-life and

⁶⁷ Joanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe: Abortion after Legalization* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 238, 303 fn 175.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

pro-choice positions were by no means stabilized by the *Roe* ruling; rather, both sides evolved considerably in the decades following the Supreme Court decision, developing new alliances, ideologies, and rhetoric in reaction to each other.

Ziegler's main sources of information are the voices of those most central to these broader shifts, as she conducted oral histories of over one hundred activists who participated in the abortion-related activism between the 1960s through 1980s. Their voices are supplemented with archival research on major pro-life and pro-choice organizations. While this thorough volume complicates the misremembering of *Roe* in public memory, it also contributes to McCorvey's erasure. Due perhaps to the organizations that Ziegler elected to study or her choice of informants, Norma McCorvey is not mentioned once in the text. This loss is all the more evident as McCorvey's voice could have added a new dimension to Ziegler's analysis of Sarah Weddington's post-*Roe* Equal Rights Amendment and abortion-related activism and the effects of post-*Roe* legislation on poor women's access to affordable abortions.⁷⁰

While many of these texts mention McCorvey fleetingly, no expansive historical text—or for that matter, more than a handful of paragraphs in a historical monograph—has been written thus far on the subject of McCorvey's life before, during, or after the *Roe* decision. Relegated to the margins of an issue in which she performed perhaps a symbolic, but nonetheless a crucial role, McCorvey has been denied the sort of scholarly analysis which could complicate the caricature into which she was reduced throughout her life.

In this thesis, I seek to provide a counterpoint to these flattened images of McCorvey. Considering the fraught nature of McCorvey's life within the context of public discourse on abortion, McCorvey's importance in this debate cannot be ascertained merely by measuring her

⁷⁰ Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 123-124, 114, 120-121, 135.

impact on policy. Rather, I hope to contextualize her work within broader historical shifts, exploring how she shaped and was shaped by public discourse on abortion. At the heart of my work lies the question, how did Norma McCorvey's status as a symbol of the abortion debate change over time, and to what extent was this linked to broader changes in pro-choice and pro-life discourse?

In the three following chapters and the epilogue, I address this question by tracing McCorvey's role as a political symbol from the moment she was selected to be the *Roe* plaintiff through her death in 2017. The first chapter, "I was just the person who became Jane Roe," follows McCorvey's reinvention as "Jane Roe," both within the legal context of the *Roe* trials and her pro-choice activism during the 1970s through the late 1980s. The second chapter, "Some little old Texas girl who got in trouble," begins by addressing the fissures that developed between McCorvey and pro-choice leaders due to her embarrassing (and politically precarious) behavior, which culminated with her initial conversion in 1995.

"She was Christ risen for our sins," the third chapter, is an exploration of McCorvey's chameleon-like transformations as a penitent and icon of the pro-life cause. In the epilogue, "Norma Leah McCorvey," I analyze the memorialization of McCorvey following her death at the age of 69, considering her post-mortem co-optation as a figurehead of the pro-life, pro-choice, and gay rights causes. By bringing McCorvey from the margins to the center of this historical narrative, a complicated, uneven image of her symbolic role emerges. Prism-like, her fractured identities and actions are not mere curiosities in and of themselves; they cast unexpected hues on legalized abortion's well-documented history.

Chapter 1 | “I was just the person who became Jane Roe”: Norma McCorvey as Plaintiff and Early Pro-Choice Figure, 1970-1989

In their personal recounting of *Roe v. Wade*, Sarah Weddington, Linda Coffee, and Norma McCorvey pinpointed the advent of the case at different points in time. For Weddington, *Roe* began “at a yard sale, amid paltry castoffs”—a benefit for the abortion referral service she provided legal aid for in Austin.⁷¹ Coffee’s earliest involvement was trickier to pin down, as she officially joined the case at Weddington’s request, but warmed to the idea of fighting Texas’s anti-abortion law while researching an earlier case.⁷² McCorvey’s version of the story was reflective of her unique role in the case. As noted before, it began with the discovery of her third pregnancy while working at a carnival.⁷³ Journalists and scholars who have sought to reconstruct *Roe*’s earliest moments have had to find a middle ground between these three women’s testimonies, crafting a backstory primarily from memory and oral history.

Most writers have reached a consensus, using the first meeting between Coffee, Weddington and McCorvey at Colombo’s Pizza at the end of 1969 or early 1970 (sources diverge on this particular point) as the de facto start of the case.⁷⁴ Finding a middle ground between the women’s testimonies, however, has not automatically translated into a fair presentation of the women themselves. For example, journalist Marian Faux’s version of the story in her 1988 book *Roe v. Wade: The Untold Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Decision That Made Abortion Legal* is rife with contradictions. While Faux attempted to construct a great woman narrative of the case, she simultaneously defeated her own goal by filling in the gaps in the visual record with subtly misogynistic language.

⁷¹ Sarah Ragle Weddington, *A Question of Choice* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993), 35.

⁷² Joshua Prager, “Exclusive: *Roe v. Wade*’s Secret Heroine Tells Her Story,” *Vanity Fair Hive*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/01/roe-v-wades-secret-heroine-tells-her-story>.

⁷³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 101.

⁷⁴ Marian Faux, *Roe v. Wade: The Untold Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Decision That Made Abortion Legal* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1989), 5-13; Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 404.

As each woman arrives, the reader is granted a detailed description of her physical appearance. Faux excuses away the shabby appearances of the first two arrivals, informing the reader that “none of the three women coming to this dinner meeting had much money.”⁷⁵ Linda Coffee, we learn immediately, cares more for her work than her looks.⁷⁶ The “diffident” lawyer attempts to convey professionalism through her attire, but more often tends towards a “disheveled appearance.” The pregnant Norma McCorvey, by contrast to Coffee, gives away her working-class background and naiveté through her choice of denim pants and a casual top.⁷⁷

Having both arrived early, the odd pair make a feeble attempt at chit-chatting with one another, an effort that is complicated by Coffee’s shyness and McCorvey’s lack of “social graces.”⁷⁸ The appearance of Sarah Weddington, a “tall, heavy-set woman,” who, despite her large frame, “moved with unusual grace,” saves the two from continued awkwardness.⁷⁹ Over pizza and beer, the three women discuss a topic that one can only assume was hardly the usual subject of conversation at the “unpretentious” Colombo’s: challenging Texas’s restrictive anti-abortion law.⁸⁰

In the ebb and flow of conversation, both the lawyers’ quest to abolish this law and McCorvey’s own pregnancy are discussed. As McCorvey tells the lawyers about the latter, her story takes a horrific turn. She recalls a harrowing tale of being raped by a man while she was working at a traveling carnival, and consequently becoming pregnant.⁸¹ While the lawyers had concerns about the validity of McCorvey’s tale, as she struggled to consistently relay the details

⁷⁵ Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4, 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3, 11-13. I have elected to use the term “anti-abortion” in this chapter to refer to Texas’s law before the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe* decision, as the law explicitly made it illegal to provide a woman with an abortion. This term is not to be confused with the “pro-life” movement. For more context, see the Preface.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

of the alleged assault, they agreed after the meeting to overlook their qualms about her reliability. McCorvey had something the two women desperately needed: a pregnancy which she had no desire to keep.⁸²

Although it is tinged with sexist language, Marian Faux's rendition of *Roe v. Wade's* origin story is a compelling one. There is a wholesome Americanness to the shared financial hardship of the three women, and an inspirational tenor to this story of three women who will go on to fight Texas's anti-abortion law despite the restrictions placed upon them by their gendered social mores of their community, not to mention to the sensational appeal of capturing the "untold story" of this controversial case. It is no wonder the Colombo's story has been told by historians, journalists, and its key players alike. In addition to taking in all three women's roles, it can easily suit a number of ideologically incompatible narratives.⁸³ Faux's telling, however, obscures many of the underlying conflicts that would later escalate into an unbridgeable divide between McCorvey and Weddington (as well as between herself and the leadership of the pro-choice movement as a whole) in the four decades following *Roe*.

By likening the socioeconomic standing of McCorvey with that of Coffee and Weddington, Faux ignores the fact that McCorvey's class status was undeniably lower than that of her lawyers, a reality that would continue to reassert itself through a number of unexpected outcomes during and after *Roe* was tried. McCorvey's poverty was not a fluke: it was a prerequisite for her to become the plaintiff in *Roe*. While her class and whiteness was crucial in Weddington and Coffee's decision to have her become the *Roe* plaintiff, these identities, as well

⁸² Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 8, 11-13.

⁸³ For example, in David J. Garrow's *Liberty and Sexuality*, he champions the work of the lawyers, but is condescending towards McCorvey due to her unreliability and colorful past. Joseph Bell's 1973 *Good Housekeeping* article, "A Landmark Decision" (which will be explored in greater detail in this chapter), wallows in McCorvey's horrific past, particularly in the grittier aspects of her rape claim. McCorvey retold the Colombo's story many times, most notably as part of her work as a pro-choice activist in her 1994 memoir *I am Roe*, and then again in an attempt to reverse *Roe* in a 2005 Senate Judiciary Hearing.

as other aspects of McCorvey’s past and personality, caused tension within the pro-choice movement as the abortion issue became increasingly politicized by pro-life activists following the 1973 Supreme Court ruling.

The class conflicts at play in the *Roe* trial cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the lawyers’ backgrounds. Sarah Weddington, the lawyer who argued the trial in both the federal district and Supreme Courts, was born in 1945 to a white, middle-class family in Abilene, Texas. As a Methodist preacher’s daughter, she was oftentimes in the spotlight in her community.⁸⁴ As such, she stated that she developed “a solid sense of confidence in [her] abilities to accomplish whatever [she] set out to do” early on in life.⁸⁵ She eschewed the expected middle-class route of marriage and raising a family as a young woman, electing instead to obtain an undergraduate degree at the Methodist McMurray College in Abilene, and then continuing on to study law at the University of Texas, Austin.⁸⁶ While she was drastically outnumbered by men as a woman entering law school in 1965— “one of forty women in a school of sixteen hundred students”— her family’s financial stability and the early education opportunities afforded to her made this nontraditional career path a feasible option.⁸⁷

In law school, Weddington became part of a community of other female law students, who often studied together and lent each other support in order to survive the male-dominated institution.⁸⁸ One of the students with whom she regularly studied was the undeniably bright Linda Coffee, a Dallas native and Rice University alumna.⁸⁹ Coffee came from “an upper-middle class Dallas suburb” and a highly-educated family. She later stated that she decided to pursue a

⁸⁴ See Appendix figure 3.

⁸⁵ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-22. McMurray College is now McMurray University, not to be confused with MacMurray College in Illinois.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁹ See appendix figure 4; *Ibid.*, 23.

law degree because she “had a BA and no teaching certificate, and law was one direction... with the least amount of flap.”⁹⁰ This colloquialism was no understatement, as Coffee soared at University of Texas School of Law. Despite the challenges she faced because of her gender, she was invited to join the law review, graduated with high honors, and passed the bar with the second highest score in the state.⁹¹

Coffee’s aforementioned postgraduate position clerking for Justice Sarah Hughes provided Coffee with both a role model of her own gender and an intellectual challenge, but she eventually moved on to a more permanent position at a firm that specialized in bankruptcy.⁹² Both she and Weddington struggled to find jobs that would lead to them becoming partners at law firms, as these opportunities were unofficially barred to women. After months of unsuccessful interviews for such jobs, a law professor recommended Weddington for a job at the American Bar Association's Special Committee on the Reevaluation of Ethical Standards, where she worked on revising the code which governed behavioral and ethical expectations for lawyers.⁹³

Ironically, the challenges that Coffee and Weddington faced in finding the careers that they desired freed them to pursue political passion projects of their own. Coffee, a closeted lesbian, found the intellectual stimulation she craved by aiding her friend, Henry McCluskey, in his case against Texas’s anti-sodomy law.⁹⁴ Weddington, who had secretly sought out and received an abortion in Mexico while in law school, became involved with a feminist consciousness-raising group in Austin. The members of the group ran an underground abortion referral service that stemmed from their work with a leftist, counterculture newspaper, *The*

⁹⁰ Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” 78.

⁹¹ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 23; Prager, “Exclusive: Roe v. Wade’s Secret Heroine Tells her Story.”

⁹² Justice Sarah Hughes gained national fame in 1963 when, following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, she swore Lyndon B. Johnson in as president on Airforce One.

⁹³ Weddington, *A Questions of Choice*, 23-24.

⁹⁴ Prager, “Exclusive: Roe v. Wade’s Secret Heroine.”

Rag.⁹⁵ While Weddington was never directly involved in writing for *The Rag* or volunteering for the referral service, she supported them through her legal expertise, coming to their aid when referral service volunteers expressed reservations about the legality of their clandestine work.⁹⁶ Eventually, her research into abortion law evolved into an ambitious goal: suing the state in order to prove that Texas's anti-abortion law was unconstitutional.⁹⁷

At this point, Weddington had never tried a contested case in court, and the preparatory work alone was a daunting enough prospect for a young lawyer. Impressed by both Linda Coffee's work as a law student and her subsequent experience with federal cases while she was clerking for Judge Sarah Hughes, Weddington knew that Coffee would be an ideal partner in this endeavor.⁹⁸ Buoyed by the excitement of aiding McCluskey in the partially-successful *Buchanan*, Coffee was eager to lend her expertise.⁹⁹ As the two women strategized, they faced a troubling dilemma: they did not have a plaintiff. In order to ensure the continued secrecy of the abortion referral service, Coffee cautioned against using the service's volunteers as plaintiffs. Thankfully, the two found a married couple, Marsha and David King, who were eager to sign on as plaintiffs early in the process.

Marsha, a Dallas-area feminist with a PhD in English approached the lawyers after hearing Coffee give a lecture on the intended lawsuit.¹⁰⁰ Due to a neurological condition, she could not safely carry a pregnancy to term, nor could she use hormonal birth control pills. As the Supreme Court had recently ruled in *Griswold v. Connecticut* that married couples had a constitutional right to privacy, the Kings presented one viable angle through which to challenge

⁹⁵ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 24-25, 11. Weddington concealed her prior abortion from the public until she published *A Question of Choice* in 1992.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-47.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45, 47-49.

⁹⁹ Prager, "Exclusive: Roe v. Wade's Secret Heroine." In *Buchanan v. Batchelor*, the federal district court ruled that Texas's anti-sodomy law was unconstitutional when applied to married couples.

¹⁰⁰ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 50; Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 400-403.

Texas's abortion law.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the lawyers knew that in order to most effectively counter the constitutionality of the statute, they would need a pregnant woman who was willing to take on the task of being a plaintiff. While the Austin abortion referral service offered a number of promising leads, none of these women elected to join the lawsuit as they had the financial means through which to acquire a safe, but illegal, abortion.¹⁰²

Meanwhile in Dallas, Norma McCorvey was not so lucky. For her, the meeting at Colombo's was not one step in a long process of legal strategizing, it was a desperate attempt to finally obtain a procedure that would free her from the physical and emotional turmoil of giving birth to a third child that she could not raise herself. Because of this major discrepancy, it is here that, in their respective memoirs, *A Questions of Choice* (1992) and *I am Roe* (1994) Weddington and McCorvey's stories begin to diverge. Notably, both texts were published in the early-1990s, over two decades after the initial federal district court *Roe* trial. Nevertheless, the two women's ideological approaches to their involvement in the case are as blatant as the chasm between the worlds they inhabited.

In McCorvey's version of her meeting with both Coffee and Weddington at Colombo's, she recalls a number of details that contradict or add additional dimensions to Faux's heroic account, primarily with regard to her sexuality and class identity. Her recollection of the two lawyer's outfits amplifies the class difference between herself and the two women. Coffee and Weddington both wore "two-piece business suits" while McCorvey wore jeans, a "button-down shirt tied at the waist," and "a bandanna [sic] tied around my left leg, above the knee" to indicate that she "didn't have a girlfriend."¹⁰³ McCorvey's casual use of a variation on the hanky code, a system for signifying sexual availability that flourished in the gay community during the 1970s,

¹⁰¹ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 400-403.

¹⁰² Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 51.

¹⁰³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 117.

was only one of the ways in which she expressed her non-normative sexuality to the lawyers.¹⁰⁴ When asked about her own life, she opened up to them about her lesbian relationships and past marriage to the abusive Woody McCorvey.¹⁰⁵ In McCorvey's telling, she only claimed that she had been raped upon sensing the lawyer's discomfort with her sexual history.¹⁰⁶ Desperate to regain their good faith, she used this story as an attempt to save face and depict herself as the sort of woman who was deserving of an abortion.¹⁰⁷

In Sarah Weddington's version, the beginning of the conversation between the three women is the same—a discussion of the intended lawsuit—but this point is one of the few areas in which her and McCorvey's story overlap.¹⁰⁸ Throughout the text, she refers to McCorvey as “Jane Roe,” and only relays that information which had already been made public by McCorvey at the time of the book's publication (in keeping with lawyer-client confidentiality).¹⁰⁹ It is clear that the autobiography was published shortly after McCorvey publicly retracted her claim of being raped, as Weddington dedicated a paragraph to explaining in detail that McCorvey's rape claim was never used by the lawyers in their case, reiterating again a few pages later that, in the affidavit McCorvey signed, “there was no mention of how she got pregnant.”¹¹⁰ While McCorvey was openly identified as a lesbian at this time, Weddington makes no note of her sexuality. The rape claim here is depicted as more of tactical move on McCorvey's part, as she

¹⁰⁴ For further information on the hanky code, particularly in its later manifestations, see Hal Fischer, “Gay Semiotics,” *Queer Cultural Center Archive*, 1977, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/HalPages/GaySempg2.html>.

¹⁰⁵ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 121.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 122. Based on *I am Roe*, McCorvey was not aware that Coffee was a lesbian during the *Roe* trial or in 1994 when the book was published.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 52-53.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56, 52-53.

ponders aloud to her lawyers whether or not being raped would increase the chances of her receiving a legal abortion.¹¹¹

Overall, Weddington's version of the story is crisp and generally unemotional. Though she claimed that McCorvey's "hard-luck stories touched a sympathetic cord," her understanding of McCorvey's involvement in the case is framed around the low-level of commitment that would be expected of her. Weddington stated that being the plaintiff required "a minimal amount of time.... she never had to answer written or oral questions for the opposition lawyers. She did not attend any of the court hearings. Second, no money. Linda and I were donating our time, and we were covering the expenses."¹¹² Weddington does not seem to fathom the very real burden that McCorvey would have to bear if she became their plaintiff: a child.

McCorvey tried her best to avoid this aspect of being the *Roe* plaintiff. According to her memoir, she asked the lawyers point blank whether or not they knew of a place where she could receive an abortion during their meeting at Colombo's.¹¹³ Weddington claimed that she did not know, a statement that smarted years later when Weddington revealed that she had had an illegal abortion before even conceiving of the *Roe* case (not to mention her close relationship with the Austin abortion referral project).¹¹⁴ While Faux went to great lengths to assure the reader that McCorvey was fully informed of the unlikelihood that she would receive an abortion due to taking on the role of plaintiff in the case, neither Weddington nor McCorvey's memoirs

¹¹¹ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 52.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 118.

¹¹⁴ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 11. McCorvey expressively notes her sense of pain and betrayal upon discovering that Weddington had an abortion herself years before *Roe* in her second memoir, *Won by Love*. McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 29. Faux's account notes that the lawyers considered seeking out a temporary restraining order (TRO), which could have allowed McCorvey to seek an abortion, but as the chances of receiving a TRO were slim, they decided against it. Faux does not state whether or not the lawyers informed McCorvey of this strategy or of their decision not to pursue it further. Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 15-16.

corroborated this assertion.¹¹⁵ In Garrow's account of the case in *Liberty and Sexuality*, which like Faux's was based on extensive interviews with Coffee and Weddington, he notes that the two lawyers were "privately thankful" that McCorvey had no choice other than to complete her pregnancy.¹¹⁶

In an insightful study of the two memoirs, legal scholar Kevin McMunigal argues that Weddington did not adequately inform McCorvey that her chances of receiving an abortion as the Roe plaintiff were slim, thereby allowing the vulnerable McCorvey to believe that being the plaintiff in the case was her most likely ticket to a legal abortion.¹¹⁷ Doing so, McMunigal states, was a questionable ethical decision on Weddington's part, as she treated McCorvey as a stand-in for pregnant women as a whole, not as a client with needs and interests of her own.¹¹⁸

Ultimately, McMunigal maintains that McCorvey should have been treated with comparable ethical standards as patients seeking out medical care or participating in medical research, namely, being provided with comprehensible information about the various strategies open to her from which she would then be able to choose.¹¹⁹

From McCorvey's perspective, becoming the case's plaintiff seemed like the best possible choice. After a few weeks of wondering what Coffee and Weddington would decide, the lawyers called McCorvey in to Coffee's office to ask her to officially become "Jane Roe."¹²⁰

Following this meeting, McCorvey had little contact with the lawyers. Occasionally, she would

¹¹⁵ Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 22-23; McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 123-124; Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 54.

¹¹⁶ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 439-440. Faux also interviewed Coffee and Weddington for *Roe v. Wade* but did not interview McCorvey as McCorvey insisted upon being paid for any interviews that she gave. Considering that McCorvey felt used by the elite women she had encountered in her capacity as "Jane Roe" up to this point, this unexplained request may have been an attempted safeguard against further manipulation. Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, xiii-xiv, 328.

¹¹⁷ Kevin C. McMunigal, "Of Clients and Causes: Two Tales of *Roe v. Wade*," *Hastings Law Journal* 47, no. 3 (1996): 816, 818.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 816-817.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 817.

¹²⁰ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 123.

speak with Henry McCluskey, who “got an earful” when he would try to discuss the possibility of helping McCorvey with adoption arrangements.¹²¹ She waited, fluctuating between boundless optimism and sinking depression. As she recalled in *I am Roe*: “When I was up, I was way up—I was the smartest thing on two legs... I'd gotten myself a pair of wonderful smart young lawyers, and I was going to win my case and be the first girl in Texas to get a legal abortion. But that great feeling didn't last long.”¹²² To assuage the anxiety she felt at the progression of her pregnancy, she escaped to Oaklawn, a Dallas hippie enclave, for weeks at a time. Here, no one pressed her for details of her pregnancy. In her words, “If I smoked enough dope and drank enough wine, it was possible to not think about being pregnant, which was good.”¹²³ Escapism and addiction proved to be a viable refuge as the possibility of legal remedy came to seem more fantastical by the day.

From the perspective of McCorvey's lawyers, she had disappeared. In *A Question of Choice*, Sarah Weddington attributes the challenge of finding her to her “financial difficulties,” which led her to move frequently.¹²⁴ By McCorvey's own admission, she had been in Oaklawn living “in a crash pad with a bunch of friendly people” while the lawyers prepared *Roe* for its initial trial.¹²⁵ The two women disagree on how McCorvey resurfaced—McCorvey claimed she called McCluskey, whereas Weddington remembered that “Mary Doe” (Marsha King) tracked her down.¹²⁶ Regardless, she reconnected with the lawyers in time to sign the *Roe* affidavit before the case went to trial on May 22, 1970.¹²⁷

¹²¹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 124.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

¹²⁴ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 60.

¹²⁵ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 125.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126, Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 60.

¹²⁷ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 59-60.

This document was a crucial piece of evidence, as in order to protect McCorvey's anonymity, the three-judge panel agreed to accept it in lieu of her deposition.¹²⁸ In Faux's opinion, the *Roe* affidavit stands as "one of the few definitive biographical statements about Norma McCorvey" as McCorvey was prone to telling reporters "different versions of her life."¹²⁹ The document is sparse in detail, written in clear but eloquent language. It conveys the facts of McCorvey's situation, for example, that she was "an unmarried woman" and that "the inability to obtain an abortion... caused [her] to suffer emotional trauma."¹³⁰ Notably, the affidavit was primarily the work of Linda Coffee.¹³¹ As such, it raises inevitable questions about Faux's use of the word "definitive," particularly in light of the colorful, multifaceted versions of herself that McCorvey would later choose to reveal to the public eye. Who was considered an expert on McCorvey, and by extension, *Roe v. Wade*, would later become as integral a theme in McCorvey's life as the case itself.

As McCorvey was visibly pregnant at the time of the first trial, she and her lawyers agreed that it would be best if she were not to appear in court at all.¹³² McCorvey recalled that she waited "as Linda and Sarah made history in [her] name."¹³³ According to *I am Roe*, when the judges announced their decision on June 17, 1970, McCorvey was initially elated to learn that she had won the case. This joy immediately gave way to anguish as Linda Coffee delivered the horrible news: the state had issued an injunction, proclaiming its intent to continue upholding Texas's anti-abortion statute. Regardless, McCorvey was already well into her third trimester of pregnancy, and therefore, both medically and legally unable to get an abortion.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 98.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 439.

¹³² McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 126; Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 62.

¹³³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 126.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-128; Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 69.

Joshua Prager's 2013 account in *Vanity Fair* rebuts this claim, stating that McCorvey gave birth before finding out the first *Roe* decision.¹³⁵ Whatever the facts of the situation are, it is clear that the lawyers were unconcerned by the fact that McCorvey had to give birth despite her role as their plaintiff. This moment merits a single sentence in Weddington's memoir: "But it was too late for Jane Roe; she gave birth early in the summer and placed the baby for adoption through Henry McCluskey."¹³⁶

In McCorvey's version, this news sets off a chain-reaction of events that would fundamentally alter the course of her life. There is a heavy-handedness to how McCorvey manages the initial shock of learning that she would have to give birth once again, as she realizes that "this moment was not really for me. It was about me, and maybe all the women who'd come before me, but it was really for all the women who were coming after me."¹³⁷ Published in 1994 and targeted towards a liberal-leaning audience, it is unsurprising that this caveat appears in the text. Nevertheless, it is followed by an unadulterated outpouring of emotion, as McCorvey later explodes: "I was nothing to Sarah and Linda, nothing more than just a name on a piece of paper. And without them, without their damn legal abortion, my soul was trapped and my body was in jail. I was hopeless. Worthless."¹³⁸ Whether this memory is recalled accurately or misremembered, this sense of betrayal would echo throughout McCorvey's subsequent activism for the rest of her life.

According to *I am Roe*, the birth of the *Roe* baby that summer was a humiliating experience for McCorvey. She was treated with hostility by the hospital staff due to her decision to place her child with an adoptive family, and a nurse asked her to feed the baby before she

¹³⁵ Prager, "The Accidental Activist."

¹³⁶ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 69.

¹³⁷ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 127.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

abruptly realized her mistake and took the child from McCorvey.¹³⁹ At another point, a hospital administrator came to discuss billing, and McCorvey responded crudely: “I told her who was taking care of the bill. And also what she could do with it. She left.”¹⁴⁰ After returning home to her father’s apartment, McCorvey found herself in a depression once again. She attempted suicide by overdosing on pills and drinking a bottle of bourbon.¹⁴¹ When her father discovered her, he assumed that she had merely drunk too much, and she did not correct him.¹⁴²

McCorvey dragged herself out of her depression through the work she could scrape together as an aide for a woman with a cognitive disability. Shortly after quitting this position, she met her future partner, Connie Gonzales, when Gonzales caught McCorvey shoplifting from the grocery store where Gonzales worked as a manager.¹⁴³ Meanwhile, Coffee and Weddington strategized, using the state’s injunction to their own advantage by appealing directly to the Supreme Court.¹⁴⁴ They were shocked and delighted when their case was selected to be heard alongside a case from Georgia, *Doe v. Bolton*. While *Roe* challenged Texas’s restrictive law which made the provision of any abortion illegal, *Doe* challenged Georgia’s more liberal abortion laws, which required that women seeking abortions petition a board of doctors.

The *Doe* legal team, comprised of lawyers from Georgia’s legal aid society with civil rights crusader Margie Pitts Hames at the helm, amassed numerous plaintiffs who sought to challenge Georgia’s law.¹⁴⁵ As noted before, the “Mary Doe” of the case was Sandra Cano (then

¹³⁹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 130-131. Norma McCorvey never reconnected with this child, but she learned of her name and gender through a private investigator in 1990. At the time of writing, McCorvey’s third child has not publicly identified herself. Joseph N. Bell, “Jane Roe Settles into Life of her Own,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1990.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 132-135. While postpartum depression is not explicitly identified in the text, the occurrence of this suicide attempt abruptly after McCorvey gave birth implies that this condition could have played a role.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 144-147.

¹⁴⁴ Normally, a circuit court would have decided the case first. Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 69, 71-72, 81.

¹⁴⁵ Margie Pitts Hames (1933-1994) was born to a poor white family in rural Tennessee. As a child, she became acutely aware of the injustices faced by black farmers. Appalled by this structural inequality, she dedicated her legal

Sandra Bensing). Like Norma McCorvey, Cano was a poor white woman who had already had multiple children, all of whom were wards of the state. Unlike Norma McCorvey, however, Cano was married. Her husband, Joel Bensing, was abusive, and had committed acts of child molestation. Cano became involved with the case when she sought help from the legal aid society to procure an abortion, obtain a divorce from her husband, and regain custody of her two older children. All of Cano's entreaties were solved in time, with the exception of receiving an abortion. Her lawyers were able to help her obtain permission to receive an abortion at Grady Memorial Hospital; however, when they tried to tell Cano the news, they could not find her as she had disappeared with Joel who was wanted for theft. When they located her, she elected not to receive the procedure as she was not comfortable having an abortion so far into her pregnancy. Unlike McCorvey, Cano was present at the initial *Doe v. Bolton* district court trial on July 31, 1970 and went out for lunch with the lawyers after the hearing.¹⁴⁶

Both sets of lawyers had a tremendous amount of preparation to do before their cases were heard on May 21, 1971. Help came to Coffee and Weddington through an unexpected source: Roy Lucas, a lawyer from the James Madison Center for Constitutional Law in New York City. Lucas, who had previously argued cases before the Supreme Court, offered to aid the two young lawyers. Weddington responded by relocating to New York City in June of 1971 to take advantage of the Center for Constitutional Law's resources.¹⁴⁷ Lucas and Weddington's alliance quickly became an uneasy one. Weddington was appalled by the lack of organization at the Center, a concern which intensified when the lawyers had to ask for two extensions from the

career to fighting for the rights of racial minorities and women. Her other legal work included a 1972 attempt to overturn racialized busing laws in Georgia and many years of work in labor-management relations. For further information, see Tomiko Brown-Nagin, "Margie Pitts Hames and the Other Landmark Abortion Rights Case: Recalling a 'Swashbuckling' Woman Lawyer," *Legal History Blog*, Feb. 27, 2011, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://legalhistoryblog.blogspot.com/2011/02/margie-pitts-hames-and-other-landmark.html>.; Wolfgang Saxon, "Margie Hames, 60; Lawyer Argued Case Tied to Roe v. Wade," *New York Times*, July 22, 1994.

¹⁴⁶ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 426-427, 444-447, 465, 497.

¹⁴⁷ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 84-88.

Supreme Court to file the *Roe* brief.¹⁴⁸ The conflict reached an impasse when Weddington learned that Lucas had informed the court that he would be arguing *Roe*.¹⁴⁹ Weddington offered a compromise to Lucas, suggesting that the two split the argument between them. Privately, she maintained the opinion that it was her case, and that, as a woman who had had an abortion, she was uniquely situated to understand the gravity of facing an unwanted pregnancy.¹⁵⁰

When the conflict escalated into a “showdown,” McCorvey became useful to Weddington once again.¹⁵¹ As the client has “the final say-so” about which lawyer argues on their behalf in a case, Weddington called the case’s plaintiffs and Linda Coffee to determine who should argue *Roe* in the Supreme Court. All of them chose Weddington.¹⁵² In *A Question of Choice*, the answers of all parties are lumped into a single, game-changing quote: “You do it, Sarah.”¹⁵³

McCorvey’s take on the same event in *I am Roe* tells more about the dynamic between the two women than Weddington’s succinct recollection. At the time, McCorvey’s life was beginning to settle. She and Gonzales had begun a cleaning service, working primarily in apartments in the Dallas area. When she heard Weddington’s voice over the phone, it was an unwelcome reminder of an unforgiving past. The tensions that had permeated their earlier relationship resurfaced immediately. As McCorvey recalled, “Sarah sounded anxious—and when she was anxious she always used complicated words. Moving these words around, putting them in different order, Sarah tried a few times to explain what she meant.”¹⁵⁴ While both anecdotes

¹⁴⁸ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 88-89.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 102

¹⁵² *Ibid.* While she continued to contribute to the preparatory work for the *Roe* Supreme Court trials, Linda Coffee was not considered to argue the case as her job left her with only minimal free time.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 138- 139, 148-149.

include the same response, Weddington's inability to communicate with the less-educated, working-class McCorvey is the predominant theme in this version, not Weddington's triumph.

After this event, *Roe v. Wade* and "Jane Roe" lived separate lives. McCorvey was not present for either the first Supreme Court hearing on December 13, 1971 or the second on October 11, 1972.¹⁵⁵ McCorvey seemed unbothered by the separation. She had found a dependable partner in the taciturn Gonzales, and her cleaning business was buoyed by a steady stream of customers. Small luxuries, such as a subscription to the daily newspaper, were no longer financial impossibilities. On January 23, 1973, she picked up the *Times-Herald* after a day's work and learned two monumental facts: Lyndon B. Johnson had died and the Supreme Court had decided *Roe v. Wade* in favor of *Roe*.¹⁵⁶

This discovery did not trigger exultation. As McCorvey later recalled, "The night I found out that *Roe v. Wade* had been decided I cried. Eventually I drank myself to sleep." She confessed to Gonzales the past which she had hidden from her— her meetings with McCluskey, Coffee, and Weddington; the decision to become the *Roe* plaintiff; the betrayal of learning that she would never get a procedure which, from this moment on, would be inextricably linked to her life. While Gonzales took this new knowledge in stride, McCorvey was unassuaged. She was immediately struck by the fear that a lie—her claim of being raped—was now an integral facet of a Supreme Court ruling.¹⁵⁷

On January 29, 1973, *The Baptist Press* published an interview with McCorvey by journalist Robert O'Brien alongside a conversation with Linda Coffee by the same journalist.

¹⁵⁵ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 109-110, 134. The reason the court asked to rehear the case is still unclear, although three likely explanations have been offered. At the time, there were two vacancies on the bench. It appears that there was conflict between the justices about the initial decision to appoint Justice Blackmun as the author of the majority opinion, which contravened the court's hierarchy. In the second edition of *A Question of Choice*, Weddington suggests that President Nixon did not wish for his court to be associated with this particular decision.

¹⁵⁶ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 150-151.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

The presence of these brief interviews in a religiously-affiliated paper and the views that the women behind *Roe* reveal indicate that, at this time, the abortion debate was not nearly as religiously or ideologically stratified as it would later become. Both women state only conditional acceptance of the morality of abortion, with Coffee stating that an abortion “except in the early stages... would tear me up.”¹⁵⁸ McCorvey seconds Coffee’s opinion, stating firmly that she “wouldn’t want to wait over three months for any abortion, because I might be ending a human life after that time.”¹⁵⁹ Only scant background information on McCorvey is included, such as her sense of isolation during her pregnancy and trouble finding employment. She tactfully omits any mention of her rape claim. The decision to include only minimal details about McCorvey’s personal life appears to be a decision that she was involved in, as she states at the end of the article “I want to think about the future now, not the past.”¹⁶⁰

The more sordid details of the *Roe* story, truthful or not, were not withheld from the public for long. In June of 1973, journalist Joseph N. Bell published an in-depth exposé in *Good Housekeeping* centered on the plaintiff of *Roe*. This article was instrumental in perpetuating the claim that a rape had caused the *Roe* pregnancy.¹⁶¹ In this article, McCorvey is hidden behind the pseudonym “Betty Mae” at the demand of Coffee and Weddington.¹⁶² The pseudonym, however, is merely one of numerous devices that cloaks the woman behind the *Roe* ruling in this article. The evocative illustration of “Betty Mae” on the front page depicts a woman in turmoil, sitting on a bench at one of bus stations which McCorvey passed through on the journey she made from

¹⁵⁸ Robert O’Brien, “Abortion Court Decision Interpreted by Attorney,” *Baptist Press* (Nashville, Tennessee), Jan. 9, 1973, 1.

¹⁵⁹ —, “Abortion Case Plaintiff Sheds Jane Roe Identity,” *Baptist Press* (Nashville, Tennessee), Jan. 9, 1973, 3.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Joseph N. Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” *Good Housekeeping* 176 Iss. 6 (New York) June 1973, 77-79, 148, 150-152.

¹⁶² —, “Jane Roe Settles into Life of her Own,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), June 28, 1990.

Georgia to Texas during the *Roe* pregnancy.¹⁶³ The woman depicted here could not be further from the scrappy Norma. This Jane Roe is a damsel in distress. An updo and sleek heels indicate a level of respectability which is tantalizingly undermined by her bare, exposed legs and short trench coat. It is difficult to reconcile this heart wrenching, feminine image of “Jane Roe” and the real McCorvey—or the story of “Betty Mae” that unfolds on the following pages.

From the beginning of the article, McCorvey’s destitute upbringing is depicted as a spectacle. For example, her numerous run-ins with the law as an adolescent, her decision to drop out of high school after the ninth grade, her unsuccessful attempt to restart her education, and her parent’s marital conflicts are used to construct the fabric of the young Betty Mae’s life. Bell suggests that this suffering was due in part to some personal shortcomings. After this vivid summary of her young life, Bell segues into a section on Coffee and Weddington by stating that, “unlike Betty Mae, Linda Coffee and Sarah Ragle met their problems head-on.”¹⁶⁴ He proceeds to chronicle the young lawyers’ prodigious educational achievements, erroneously suggesting that hard work alone determined the sizable gulf between the lives of the lawyers from that of their client.

Bell fluctuates wildly between enthusiasm for the remarkable ruling and morbid fascination with its plaintiff. Betty Mae is described as “an unlikely catalyst,” as Bell condescendingly goes on to note, “The people who have worked so hard for so long to change American laws and attitudes toward abortion would scarcely have chosen her to carry their banner.”¹⁶⁵ Rather than focusing the article on the ruling, he gratuitously positions McCorvey’s alleged rape as the apex of her story. This incident, which McCorvey here claims was committed by one of three rowdy men who sexually harassed her while she was working at the carnival, has

¹⁶³ See Appendix figure 5.

¹⁶⁴ Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” 78.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

all the trappings of a grisly horror movie. McCorvey sets the scene on a country backroad late one night as she and two friends were walking back from the carnival to their motel. The three men ambush and separate the women, attacking each in such a horrid fashion that McCorvey was covered in “violent burns and bruises” to the point where her companions assumed that she was dead.¹⁶⁶ But even this alarming tale is not without its silver lining in Bell’s rendition. As he optimistically states in the introduction to the article, Betty Mae’s decision to challenge the Texas’s demand that she “bear a child conceived in rape” has liberated all women in the United States from the burden of “carrying unwanted babies” as they “can now be aborted virtually on request.”¹⁶⁷

Bell’s article marked the end of McCorvey’s public life as an icon of the pro-choice movement for nearly a decade. Meanwhile, the public debate on abortion exploded. Before *Roe v. Wade*, opponents of legalized abortion were not the familiar factions that make up the contemporary pro-life movement. Pre-1973, pro-life activists predominantly came from two main groups: liberal, anti-Vietnam War activists who saw abortion as one of many examples of the government-sanctioned violence, and Catholics, who adopted a pro-life platform which encompassed life from conception to natural death.¹⁶⁸ Abortion began to develop its value as political currency among Evangelical Christians and the rising New Right at the end of the Vietnam War. This war shattered the image of American innocence on the international stage.¹⁶⁹ A new hope came in the form of the mass evacuation of Vietnamese children to the United States in a campaign entitled Operation Babylift.¹⁷⁰ This campaign solidified an association between

¹⁶⁶ Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” 150.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶⁸ Daniel K. Williams, “The Partisan Trajectory of the American Pro-Life Movement: How a Liberal Catholic Campaign became a Conservative Evangelical Cause.” *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 451-475.

¹⁶⁹ Randall Balmer, “American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity,” in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, 47-62 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 57-58.

¹⁷⁰ There is an obvious resemblance between the title of this campaign and the name of Operation Rescue.

the rescue of helpless young lives and reconstructing the image of the United States as a powerful, yet blameless nation.¹⁷¹

During the 1960s through the 1980s, the Right was undergoing massive internal shifts. In the wake of the Cold War, the usual rhetoric of the Communist menace no longer held the same political resonance. These fears did not disappear. Rather, they were placed in opposition to a new target: the rising New Left. The threat of an outside enemy was replaced with the fear of the menace within the nation: the infusion of liberal ideologies into the public education system, the bolstering of the welfare state, and the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.¹⁷² Reagan actively courted Democrats who felt disenchanted by the unrealized promises of the New Deal from early on in his political career thus bolstering his voting base.¹⁷³ His ascendancy to the presidency in 1981 and the flourishing of single-issue campaigns championed by conservative politicians indicated to the broader public that the New Right was here to stay.¹⁷⁴

Heartened by the pro-family rhetoric of the New Right, which linked national decline with the demise of the “traditional” (white, middle-class, Christian) family, Evangelicals saw a new hope in the revamped Right.¹⁷⁵ The 1980s marked their big break onto the national political stage. They built coalitions with New Right leaders over single-issue morality-based campaigns designed to counteract the effects of the New Left.¹⁷⁶ In addition to women’s rights and the AIDS epidemic, abortion became a central cause. The threat that abortion posed to the traditional family in the minds of the New Christian Right was not explicitly shared by their less-religious

¹⁷¹ Karen McCarthy Brown, "Fundamentalism and the Control of Women," in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, 175-201 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 178, 177-178.

¹⁷² Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15, 69, 183-184

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 199-202, 225-232.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 225, 232.

allies, but many on the Right opposed *Roe* as they saw it as a sign of judicial overreach.¹⁷⁷

Initially, the two factions joined forces by attempting to pass a Human Rights Amendment, which would have resulted in an amendment to the Constitution codifying the idea that human life begins at conception.¹⁷⁸

When this attempt failed in 1982, the pro-life movement split. Incrementalists sought to chip away at abortion access through legislative challenges, but absolutists, who fought for the wholesale outlawing of abortion, considered the incrementalist approach to be weak and comprising.¹⁷⁹ Extreme Christian pro-life activists were emboldened by thinkers such as evangelist Francis Schaeffer who, according to anthropologist Faye Ginsburg, saw abortion as “the epitome of twentieth-century decadence,” used civil disobedience to combat abortion.¹⁸⁰ Both legislative attempts and direct action took the political sphere by storm, destabilizing the assumed certainty of *Roe*’s legal status.

Norma McCorvey was not oblivious to the escalation of the abortion debate. In her own words, she attempted to “inch out of the closet” in the early 1980s in support of the pro-choice movement.¹⁸¹ She attended a woman’s rights rally in Dallas, and began volunteering at the Routh Street Clinic, which organized campaigns for the Equal Rights Amendment in addition to providing reproductive health services. She found reasons to be both fearful and disappointed in

¹⁷⁷ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 50-51. This critique of *Roe v. Wade* as judicial overreach is not exclusive to the New Right. Staunch supporter of abortion rights Ruth Bader Ginsburg famously (and controversially) remarked in a 2014 interview in the *Washington Post* that a decision of this magnitude should have been decided by elected officials rather than unelected justices. Ginsburg maintains that the sweeping changes introduced by the Supreme Court’s *Roe* decision exposed legalized abortion to undue backlash, which could have been avoided had abortion been legalized by the legislature. Robert Barnes, “The forgotten history of Justice Ginsburg’s criticism of *Roe v. Wade*,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 2016.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷⁹ Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 50-51, 80-83.

¹⁸⁰ Faye D. Ginsburg, “Rescuing the Nation: Operation Rescue and the Rise of Anti-Abortion Militance,” in *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*, edited by Rickie Solinger, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1998, 229.

¹⁸¹ Debbie Nathan, “The Death of Jane Roe,” *Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 30, 1996, 34.

both settings. As she recounted in *I am Roe*, on her way to the rally, she ran into pro-life protesters who declared that they'd like to kill Jane Roe "Because she kills babies."¹⁸² She ran away before ever locating the other pro-choice activists.¹⁸³

The Routh Street Clinic provided a safer environment at first. McCorvey enjoyed the work, and began to open up to other volunteers, revealing that she was "Jane Roe."¹⁸⁴ Heartened by their support, she confessed a perhaps harder secret to the clinic's director, renowned feminist activist Charlotte Taft: she had doubts about the morality of abortion.¹⁸⁵ This particular story is (unsurprisingly) omitted from her first memoir, which was published while McCorvey was still a pro-choice figure. Taft later recalled the odd disclosure in a 1996 *Village Voice* article, claiming that, at the time, she chalked up McCorvey's disclosure to her depression and alcoholism.¹⁸⁶

McCorvey's volunteer work there ended after this due to an unrelated incident. One day, then-president of the National Organization for Women, Eleanor Smeal, visited the clinic. McCorvey shared her open secret with Smeal, hoping to receive the same response that she had from the other Routh Street activists. Smeal was not convinced and told McCorvey as much.¹⁸⁷ This incident was enough to send McCorvey reeling back into the shadows.

There is reason to believe that McCorvey may have agreed to another on-the-record media appearance as "Jane Roe" around this time. An Associated Press photo taken in 1982 depicting a maudlin McCorvey leaning against a paint roller (emblematic of her position as a

¹⁸² McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 156-157.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁸⁵ Charlotte Taft is a Texas-based feminist activist who began working at the Routh Street Clinic in 1978. In reaction to the abortion regret that she began to witness in the mid-1980s, she introduced a revolutionary pro-choice abortion counseling program. At present, she works as a therapist, specializing in treating women who are planning to have or who have received abortions. For further information, see Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 36; and "Charlotte Taft," *Imagine Counseling*, accessed April 9, 2018, <http://www.imaginecounseling.com/index.php>.

¹⁸⁶ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 34.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

contractor at the time) circulated after her death in 2017.¹⁸⁸ Two articles, one published in *People* in 1989 and a follow-up article by Joseph N. Bell in 1992, mentioned that McCorvey made a media appearance during the early 1980s. According to these accounts, McCorvey revealed her “Jane Roe” identity out of frustration sometime before 1984, as a journalist claimed that Roe was a fictitious person invented in order to make abortion legal. The two sources disagree on the outcome of the event. In Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong's 1989 *People* article, they claim that McCorvey shared her story with a Dallas TV reporter in between the rally and McCorvey's 1984 public appearances, but consequently “became the victim of egg-throwing vandals and the object of hate mail.”¹⁸⁹ In Bell's version, McCorvey chose to return to anonymity as she feared the legal consequences of her rape claim being discovered as a myth.¹⁹⁰

In McCorvey's own telling, her Jane Roe alter-ego remained closeted until 1984. The decision to come out as Roe was not in reaction to a doubting reporter, but in reaction to a request from Sarah Weddington. Weddington contacted McCorvey on behalf of Uma Pemmarju, a Dallas-area reporter who was doing a story on the escalation of the abortion debate. Fueled by “bootleg Valium pills” and vodka, McCorvey fumbled her way through an uncomfortable interview: an inauspicious beginning of a life that would soon be lived in the public eye.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ See Appendix figure 6.

¹⁸⁹ Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong, “The Woman Behind Roe v. Wade.” *People Magazine* 30, no. 20, May 22, 1989.

¹⁹⁰ Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate the source in which a journalist suggested that “Jane Roe” was a fictitious person, nor have I been able to find the 1980 interview in which Norma McCorvey identified herself as Jane Roe. However, Joseph N. Bell (a journalist who maintained a friendship with McCorvey between 1973 and the early 1990s) claims in a 1992 article, “Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade,” that McCorvey outed herself as “Jane Roe” twice during the early 1980s. Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong tell a different version of this story in their profile of McCorvey in *People* (1989), suggesting that the two discrete events, which Bell more carefully chronicles in his article, were elided into a single event in the *People* article. Joseph N. Bell, “Caught In The Spotlight Of Roe V. Wade,” *Sun Sentinel* (Broward County, Florida), Oct. 25, 1992.

¹⁹¹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 173.

After this interview, McCorvey remained associated with the “Jane Roe” identity.¹⁹² A new world was opened to her as the public scrambled to learn more about the mysterious plaintiff. Journalist Fred Friendly invited her to stay with his family at his Scarsdale, NY home and speak to his students at Columbia University while researching his 1984 book *The Constitution: That Delicate Balance*.¹⁹³ Famed journalist Carl Rowan asked McCorvey to be appear on his show *Searching for Justice*, which explored landmark Supreme Court cases.

Despite these opportunities, McCorvey was plagued by uncertainty. She was petrified about the possibility of someone finding out that she had lied about being raped. As she pondered in *I am Roe*, “What example was I setting? In the long run, what good would come from passing off half-truths and coverups? What would happen to me, or the pro-choice movement, if someone dug up the truth and threw it in my face?” In an effort to unburden herself, McCorvey made a daring choice. During her interview with Rowan on *Searching for Justice*, she renounced her rape claim.¹⁹⁴

A brouhaha ensued.¹⁹⁵ Thankfully for McCorvey, her admission did not endanger the *Roe* decision as, unbeknownst to her, Coffee and Weddington opted to not include the rape claim as part of her legal strategy.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, a scandal of this caliber made an irreparable dent in her credibility. This disclosure during the adolescence of McCorvey’s pro-choice activism, as

¹⁹² Bell, “Caught in the Spotlight.”

¹⁹³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 172-175.

¹⁹⁴ Kenneth B. Noble, “Key Abortion Plaintiff Now Denies She Was Raped,” *New York Times*, Sept. 9, 1987. This article was published in advance of the broadcast of *Searching for Justice*.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., “‘Jane Roe’ Recants Rape Claim,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 9, 1987; United Press, “The Woman Whose Famous Abortion Case led to the Supreme Court’s *Roe vs. Wade* Decision,” Sept. 9, 1987.

¹⁹⁶ Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 58-60. The fact that this incident damaged McCorvey’s reputation but did not destroy her outright speaks to the protections afforded to McCorvey at times by her whiteness. In 1987, the same year as McCorvey’s rape claim redaction, Tawana Brawley, a black 16-year old from Wappinger Falls, NY infamously made a false claim of a racially-fueled gang rape against four white men, including two police officers and the county’s assistant district attorney. Brawley lost her case and was later convicted of defamation. The accusations and subsequent court decision stratified the nation along racial lines. The damage to Brawley’s image was so great, she has since left her hometown and adopted a new name. For further information, see “The Tawana Brawley Story,” *New York Times Retro Report*, June 3, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000002258183/the-tawana-brawley-story.html>.

she was just developing a space in the national dialogue, marked her as an untrustworthy outsider. The aftershocks pervade Weddington's 1992 memoir. Although it was published three years later, Weddington bends over backwards to prove how irrelevant the rape claim was to *Roe*'s outcome.¹⁹⁷ In the years that followed, McCorvey faced an uphill battle in her quest to be recognized and taken seriously as a pro-choice figure. Ultimately, these tensions coupled with McCovey's own doubts about abortion would prove so volatile, she would renounce her "Jane Roe" identity.

¹⁹⁷ Weddington, "A Question of Choice," 58-60.

Chapter 2 | “Some little old Texas girl who got in trouble”: Norma McCorvey and the Escalation of the Abortion Debate, 1989-1995

Norma McCorvey is standing in front of the Supreme Court building, beaming, eyes directed heavenwards. Gloria Allred, renowned feminist attorney, stands to her right, gazing warmly in Norma’s direction. Their hands are clasped together, held high above their heads. Sunlight illuminates their grinning faces as a crowd of photographers clusters about them, hoping to snap a shot of the famous pair. Their body language conveys a strength akin to that of The Winged Victory of Samothrace: a female vitality, unabashed and triumphant. It is easy to imagine that this photo depicts “Jane Roe” at the moment when she learned that she won her case. All the elements are there: the awe-inspiring facade of the court house, the presence of a famous attorney and crusader for women’s rights, and most importantly, Norma McCorvey herself.

It is unlikely that any pictures were taken of the then-anonymous McCorvey on that day in January of 1973. This picture, taken after *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* was argued on April 26, 1989, has been used as a stand-in for such a photo in numerous articles about McCorvey published since.¹⁹⁸ At the time, McCorvey was in the thick of her pro-choice activism. She had allied herself with Allred, who fiercely protected and promoted her client at every turn.

¹⁹⁸ See Appendix figure 7. A few examples include Julia Carpenter, “The fascinating life of Norma McCorvey, the ‘Jane Roe’ in *Roe v. Wade*,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 22, 2016; Bridgette Dunlap, “Will America Lost *Roe v. Wade* Under Trump?,” *Rolling Stone*, Jan. 17, 2017; and Moira Donegan, “What the Culture Wars Did to Norma McCorvey,” *The New Republic*, Feb. 22, 2017. A jarring example of the confusion surrounding this image can be seen if one uses the photo as a query in the Google Images “search by image” function. A sample of the captions that the search engine came up with to identify the photo are “*Roe v Wade 1973*,” “*Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee*,” “*Norma McCorvey Roe v Wade*,” “*Gloria Allred Roe v Wade*,” and “*Roe v Wade Decision*.” None of the searches produced any results related to *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*.

Nevertheless, McCorvey's jubilation on that day masked the simmering internal and external tensions that would eventually culminate in her conversion to evangelical Christianity. From the late 1980s through 1995, Norma McCorvey found herself entangled in what constitutional law scholar Laurence H. Tribe deemed the "clash of absolutes": the seemingly unresolvable battle between the life of the fetus and the liberty of the mother in the abortion debate.¹⁹⁹ As Tribe posits in his 1990 text, these two values comprise the twin pillars of liberty in the U.S. Constitution; therefore, debate on abortion has calcified into an oppositional conflict in which middle ground seems unimaginable.²⁰⁰ Considering that the two positions Tribe grapples with, the pro-choice and pro-life platforms, were recent historical inventions, the book's premise reveals how feverish the debate on abortion was at the time of its publication.²⁰¹

Tribe pays lip service to McCorvey in a brief paternalistic yet sympathetic summary at the beginning of the text of how she got embroiled in a conflict of this scope. He is particularly understanding of the circumstances that would have led McCorvey to claim she was raped before abortion was legal.²⁰² Ultimately, Tribe argues that McCorvey, like other women seeking abortions, had been "reduced to ghostly anonymity," rendering her invisible to those who uphold life over liberty.²⁰³ Yet in his "challenge [to] the inevitability of permanent conflict" which follows, he focuses primarily on legal analysis and therefore does little to reinscribe McCorvey into the narrative of the debate she helped generate.

This area is not the only aspect in which Tribe's analysis of McCorvey fails to account for the complexity of her role in the abortion debate. As a pro-choice icon, the real, human

¹⁹⁹ Laurence H. Tribe, *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 3.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰¹ For a brief history of the emergence of these two platforms, see Daniel K. Williams, "The Partisan Trajectory of the American Pro-Life Movement: How a Liberal Catholic Campaign became a Conservative Evangelical Cause," *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 451-475.

²⁰² Tribe, *Abortion*, 5.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

McCorvey was not only invisible to those who opposed legalized abortion; she was incomprehensible to those who claimed her as a figurehead and ally. Caught between the binaries of pro-choice and pro-life rhetoric, the working class and the middle class, the undereducated and highly educated, non-normative and hegemonic sexualities, rural and urban cultures, and conceptions of victimhood and empowerment, her instability as a political symbol was the defining feature of her time as a pro-choice icon. McCorvey was not engaged in a single “clash of absolutes”; she was hemmed in by conflict and controversy over political meaning on every side. It is little wonder, then, that she would eventually attempt to find resolution in the form of a blanket rejection of the pro-choice movement and platform.

The late 1980s were a time of unprecedented turmoil for the pro-choice movement. While pro-life politicians and activists began mounting organized attacks on legalized abortion a decade earlier, grassroots and legislative actions reached a fever pitch in this decade.²⁰⁴ Following the *Roe* decision, small cells of vigilante activists headed by Catholic women combined military and street theater-inspired tactics to effectively shut down abortion clinics.²⁰⁵ Female activists would enter clinics undetected and hide in bathrooms while male rescuers blocked the entrances. When the doors were blocked, historian Karissa Haugeberg elaborates, “activists would swarm the building, encouraging women in the waiting room to leave the building, screaming at clinic staff to stop ‘killing’ babies, and destroying medical equipment.”²⁰⁶ As more Evangelical Christians

²⁰⁴ For example, Operation Rescue’s 1988 “Siege of Atlanta” campaign lasted 6 days and resulted in the arrests of over 300 activists. Pro-choice organizations responded in turn, preparing for the upcoming *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* trial by organizing \$2 million campaign to raise awareness about the case. A pro-life rally in D.C. to draw attention to the case in 1989 drew 67,000 protesters, and a subsequent pro-choice rally brought 300,000 supporters to D.C. Jeff Kunerth, “Police Arrest 360 in ‘Siege of Atlanta’,” *Orland Sun Sentinel*, October 5, 1988; Associated Press, “Abortion Protests Lead to Arrests,” March 24, 1989; Ed Bruske, “300,000 March Here for Abortion Rights,” *Washington Post*, April 10, 1989.

²⁰⁵ Karissa Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 80-96.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

adopted the pro-life platform, interest in these tactics grew, and their actions came to be known as the “rescue movement”: a mass, coordinated effort to save fetuses from abortion.

One of these Evangelical Christians was a man named Randall Terry.²⁰⁷ In 1983, Terry claimed that he had a divinely inspired vision of performing large-scale protests at abortion clinics. His chance to make this dream a reality came in 1986 when Catholic rescue movement founder Joan Andrews was arrested and sentenced to five years in a Florida prison for charges ranging from malicious mischief to assault.²⁰⁸ Andrews, a pro-life pioneer, had become involved in abortion-related activism in 1973. During the late-1970s through mid-1980s, she traveled across the United States, performing rescues on a weekly basis. While she was arrested over 120 times for trespassing and related offenses, her 1986 sentencing drew widespread admiration from the growing pro-life movement but dethroned her from a position as a leader.²⁰⁹

Andrews’s loss was Terry’s gain. “Free Joan Andrews” protests drew massive crowds of pro-life activists in want of a new leader. Terry used these rallies to recruit for his new organization: Operation Rescue (OR).²¹⁰ In 1987, OR performed their first “rescue” of an abortion clinic in Cherry Hill, NJ. The three hundred activists who joined Terry that day held a worship service while blockading the clinic from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., effectively shutting down the facility for the day. Over 200 were arrested that evening.²¹¹ Under Terry’s leadership, the

²⁰⁷ See Appendix figure 8. Randall Terry was born in New York City but grew up in Henrietta, NY, a suburb of Rochester. As a young man, he dreamed of becoming a rock and roll star, but his dream went unrealized and he returned to upstate New York to work as a salesman. Fascinatingly, Terry became a fundamentalist Christian independently of his family; his female family members (including his mother, three sisters, and aunt) were all staunch feminists dedicated to reproductive rights. He obtained his theological training at the non-denominational Elim Bible Institute, which is strongly associated with the Evangelical and charismatic traditions. For more information, see Susan Faludi, “The Antiabortion Crusade of Randy Terry,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 23, 1989.

²⁰⁸ Haugeberg, *Women Against Abortion*, 92.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 79, 87-93.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

²¹¹ Ginsburg, “Rescuing the Nation,” 227.

organization blossomed, drawing 35,000 activists to cities throughout the United States for massive blockades of abortion clinics by 1990.²¹²

With this gradual shift from female Catholic to male Evangelical leaders came far-reaching consequences in the overall gendering of the rescue movement. Terry intentionally appointed white Evangelical men to positions of leadership in Operation Rescue, in keeping with conservative evangelical beliefs that only men should provide guidance in religious settings. The language used to describe the organization's tactics became distinctly martial, reflecting the influence of what several scholars have referred to as "American muscular Christianity."²¹³ This brand of religion first flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way to reinvigorate men's spiritual practice and civic engagement, thereby counterbalancing the effeminizing effects of modern conveniences and the shift towards more sedentary occupations.²¹⁴ Adherents saw physical fitness and spiritual well-being as inseparable and demonstrated their faith through participation in athletic activity.²¹⁵

After its initial introduction, muscular Christianity did not become dormant; rather, it was reinvented and repurposed by Christian subgroups at moments when they believed conventional white masculinity was threatened. As anthropologist Faye Ginsburg observed, it emerged within the rapidly-expanding OR, which was a clear reaction to the successes of the women's rights movement.²¹⁶ With OR's co-option of martial language, referring to protests as "campaigns" and "sieges" and patriarchal leadership structures, a blatant gendered dichotomy emerged. The pro-

²¹² Ginsburg, "Rescuing the Nation," 228.

²¹³ Ibid., 233.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 240-242; Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1.

²¹⁵ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1-6.

²¹⁶ Ginsburg, "Rescuing the Nation," 240. A more recent example is Tim Tebow, an NFL player who drew widespread national attention for writing references to Biblical passages on his eye blacks. For more information, see Lisa Miller, "Manliness is Next to Godliness," *New York Magazine*, Sept. 2, 2012, <http://nymag.com/news/sports/tebow-sanchez/tim-tebow-christianity-2012-9/>.

life movement was virile and heroic, led by champions and protectors of fetal rights. By contrast, pro-choice leaders were unnatural: perverse, man-hating feminists, likely lesbians as well.²¹⁷

While OR was bringing radical tactics into the mainstream, a controversial Supreme Court case posed unprecedented legal challenges to abortion access.²¹⁸ A Missouri statute introduced in 1986 imposed twenty new abortion-related restrictions which reflected the influence of pro-life lobbyists. These new laws virtually outlawed abortion after the sixteenth week of pregnancy through a clever pairing of two statutes. One statute stated that abortions after this point must be performed in hospitals; a subsequent statute forbade public hospital workers to take part in abortions and made illegal the use of public funds to subsidize abortions. Furthermore, the law required extensive and potentially life-threatening testing for fetal viability and outlawed all doctors from recommending that a patient receive an abortion, even when the woman's health was at risk.²¹⁹

As many of these provisions had previously been ruled unconstitutional in *Planned Parenthood v. Ashcroft* (1983), five medical professionals working at a public hospital sued the state of Missouri, resulting in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*.²²⁰ Due to the development of new medical technologies that increased fetal viability earlier in gestation, however, the court was willing to revisit its decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Ashcroft*. Before this case, the Supreme Court had consistently ruled that threats to abortion access in the first

²¹⁷ An example of this trope can be found in *Won by Love*, in which McCorvey spins a fantastical yarn about the spiteful professional feminist with whom she testifies against the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice David Souter. Additionally, Carol Mason deconstructs the "lesbian nurse" archetype in her analysis of apocalyptic themes in pro-life rhetoric, *Killing for Life*. This rhetoric will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 43-46; Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 158-186.

²¹⁸ N. E. H Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer, *Roe V. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy in American History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 230.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 228-230.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

trimester were unconstitutional.²²¹ If decided in favor of Missouri, *Webster* had the potential to reverse that pattern.

When the case reached the Supreme Court in 1989, pro-choice and pro-life forces came out in droves to Washington D.C. to express their views on the case.²²² Among the star-studded cast of VIPs invited to appear at a rally in support of reproductive rights—among them Betty Friedan, Barbra Streisand, and Jane Fonda— was the controversial figurehead of choice herself, Norma McCorvey.²²³ Four days before McCorvey was scheduled to appear in the capital, she made the news for an entirely different reason. In the early hours of April 4, 1989, an unidentified gunman showered McCorvey and Gonzales’s house with a hailstorm of bullets, shattering windows and a glass front door.²²⁴ Neither was injured, but both were shaken.²²⁵

McCorvey’s version of the story in *I am Roe* (1994) dodges the impact of this traumatic event by playing up the Jane Roe/ Norma McCorvey duality that is threaded throughout her memoir: “I think it's safe to assume that the woman they were trying to scare or hurt or kill wasn't Norma McCorvey, a poor uneducated Texas building manager. The woman they were aiming at was Jane Roe.”²²⁶ Nevertheless, it was Norma McCorvey who had to deal with the aftermath, not her symbolic counterpart.

²²¹ Haugeberg, *Women Against Abortion*, 142.

²²² Hull and Hoffer, *The Abortion Rights Controversy*, 232.

²²³ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 194.

²²⁴ Reports of the shooting were published across the United States on the day after the attack: Times Wire Service, “Nation: Shotgun Blasts Fired at Home, Car of Key Abortion Case's 'Jane Roe',” New York, NY: April 5, 1989; United Press, “Shots fired at home of abortion's Jane Roe,” April 5, 1989. In Joshua Prager’s “The Accidental Activist” (published in 2013), Connie Gonzales claimed that this attack never occurred; however, multiple newspaper reports noted the type of shotgun, the type of damage inflicted on the house, and that a cartridge was recovered at the scene. In a 1992 profile of McCorvey, Joseph N. Bell observes that the front door of the house was still scarred with bullets marks three years after the attack. Gonzales’s 2013 take on the alleged incident may have been impacted by her overall anger towards McCorvey, who left her in 2005. Joshua Prager, “The Accidental Activist,” *Vanity Fair*, February, 2013, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/norma-mccorvey-roe-v-wade-abortion>; Bell, “Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade,” October 25, 1992.

²²⁵ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 184-185, 193.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

The disappointments McCorvey experienced at the *Webster* rally four days later hardly helped matters. While McCorvey's "Jane Roe" identity got her invited to sit on stage with the VIPs, McCorvey herself was not invited to speak.²²⁷ Once again, McCorvey found herself being treated as a mere body by those proclaiming to fight for women's autonomy. This decision may not have been surprising given McCorvey's shaky standing in the movement following her redaction of her rape claim two years earlier. Nevertheless, the decision to silence McCorvey was particularly ironic. Poor women ultimately had the most to lose from the *Webster* ruling due to the potential legalization of state cuts to public funding for abortions.²²⁸

McCorvey puts a positive spin on her rejection at the rally in *I am Roe*, but it seems that her emotions were easier to read than she assumed.²²⁹ As Debbie Nathan notes in "The Death of Jane Roe," McCorvey caught the eye of attorney Gloria Allred when she "noticed McCorvey sitting forlorn and ignored on the speaker's platform at the 1989 Washington rally."²³⁰ Because of this fated meeting, the rally was not a total loss for McCorvey. Allred recognized McCorvey's potential to be a face of the pro-choice movement if she were to be provided with support and public-speaking training. Following the rally, she and McCorvey began a partnership. Allred featured McCorvey at rallies and press conferences, using events such as the introduction of new legislation or high-stakes Supreme Court hearings (including the trial for *Webster v.*

Reproductive Health Services on April 26, 1989) to shift the spotlight onto McCorvey.²³¹

Shortly after this appearance, McCorvey made headlines once again as a dramatized,

²²⁷ Andrew Rosenthal, "Reporter's Notebook; 'Jane Roe' Has Part in a Drama of High Emotion," *New York Times*, April 9, 1989; McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 193-197; McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 17-23; Debbie Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," *Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 30, 1996, 32; Robin Toner, "Right to Abortion Draws Thousands to Capital Rally" *New York Times*, April 10, 1989.

²²⁸ Hull and Hoffer, *The Abortion Rights Controversy*, 232; Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 114, 120-124, 135.

²²⁹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 194-195.

²³⁰ Debbie Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," *Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 30, 1996, 35.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, Prager, "The Accidental Activist."

made-for-TV movie version of *Roe v. Wade* premiered on NBC on May 15, 1989. The creation of this film and its reception are telling in regard to how fraught public discourse on abortion was at this time. Producer Michael Mannheim approached McCorvey early on in the production process to invite her to take on a role as a consultant for the film. McCorvey was delighted to be asked to participate. She provided input on versions of the script and met with Holly Hunter, who portrayed “Jane Roe” in the film. She even provided Hunter with accessories that she wore in the movie.²³²

But controversy plagued the production process of *Roe v. Wade*. Pro-life activists attempted to halt the film’s creation, posing unique challenges for the filmmakers. In order to avoid protestors, the producers distributed scripts and reserved filming sites under false names.²³³ McCorvey too faced conflicts, albeit ones of a more personal nature, during the film’s creation. The film provided her with an employment opportunity, but renewed conflict between her and her former lawyers was a sorry reminder that, while she was “Jane Roe,” the realities of her class would mark her as a perennial outsider in the pro-choice movement. Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee were both brought on as consultants as well and were paid \$90 more per hour than McCorvey’s \$35 hourly wage.²³⁴ While McCorvey initially seemed understanding about the discrepancy in payment in *I am Roe*, noting that such a fee was standard for lawyers, it clearly struck a nerve. In both of her memoirs, she recalls how appalled she was by Weddington’s suggestion that she donate the proceeds from the film to a non-profit organization such as the National Organization for Women, as Weddington herself planned to do.²³⁵

²³² See Appendix figure 9. Lisa Belkin, “Woman Behind the Symbols in Abortion Debate,” *New York Times* May 9, 1989; Prager, “The Accidental Activist;” Michelle Green and Lois Armstrong. “The Woman Behind *Roe v. Wade*,” *People Magazine*, May 22, 1989.

²³³ Nancy Mills, “*Roe vs. Wade*’ Filming as Sensitive as Abortion Issue,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1989; Bill Carter, “Crafting ‘*Roe v. Wade*’ Tiptoeing on a Tightrope,” *New York Times* May 14, 1989.

²³⁴ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 177.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 178; McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 35.

It is unclear how much McCorvey ultimately received due to her involvement in the film. In *I am Roe*, the total amount that McCorvey had received as of the time of publication was “a little over \$50,000;” however, a 2013 article by journalist Joshua Prager lists the total amount as \$10,613.²³⁶ Whatever the final sum was, it was a boon to McCorvey. As she recalled in *Won by Love*, she “was finally being offered some money for something that didn't have me breaking my back” —a rare situation for a woman who made her living from blue collar work, such as cleaning and construction.²³⁷ It is unsurprising then that Weddington's suggestion that she donate her earnings to an organization governed by comparatively wealthy women who kept her at arm's length would have inspired resentment years after the event. To have her economic survival misread as greed by someone who was earning over three times as much as her must have chafed.

The initial empowerment that McCorvey experienced during the film's production process did not extend to her feelings about how she was represented in the film. The “Jane Roe” character was given yet another pseudonym—Ellen Russell—and was sanitized and straightwashed.²³⁸ This Jane Roe had a butch companion, portrayed by Kathy Bates, but there was no indication that their relationship was anything but platonic. The fictional Jane Roe and Sarah Weddington were not divided by elitism and misunderstanding but shared a wholesome friendship—they chatted on the phone about male beaus and shared drinks at the bar where Ellen worked. Their friendship was clearly occupied a homosocial domain reserved for straight women. Conveniently, in the film, Ellen redacted her rape claim before the *Roe* Supreme Court

²³⁶ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 178; Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

²³⁷ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 35.

²³⁸ The term “straightwashed” refers to the presentation of real or fictional members of the LGBTQ community as straight in the media, particularly in fictionalized versions of historical events or film adaptations of novels. For further information on the term, see John Kelly, “Whitewash, pinkwash, cloudwash, and blackwash: the many shades of -wash,” *Oxford Dictionaries* (blog), Jan. 12, 2017, accessed April 11, 2018, <https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2017/01/12/whitewash-wash-suffix/>.

trial, thus symbolically cleansing the court's decision of any real or imagined falsehoods imposed by Ellen's real-life counterpart.²³⁹

Five years later, McCorvey recalled, "I recognized that woman up on the screen. She was me, taken apart and pasted back together again with most of the rough edges cut off. Which naturally got me to wondering: was 'Ellen Campbell' [sic] the roughest version of Norma McCorvey the world could stand to watch?"²⁴⁰ Unfortunately for McCorvey, her fears would soon be realized. As journalist Debbie Nathan reported in 1996, "After *Roe v. Wade* won an Emmy, the new, sanitized Jane Roe was in demand as a speaker everywhere, even at Catholic schools and ladies clubs."²⁴¹ But McCorvey was often overshadowed by her fictionalized counterpart, largely because she lacked the sort of expertise on abortion that she felt was a prerequisite for her voice to be a valuable one in the abortion debate. She oftentimes felt that she was being mocked and became paranoid about how she presented herself.²⁴²

While the public were given a simplifying lens through which to view McCorvey in the 1989 TV movie, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals sought to construct a frame of their own in order to better understand McCorvey's seemingly contradictory behavior. Attempts at reconciling McCorvey's idiosyncrasies with the public's expectations of her can be seen in the recurring use of the moniker, "some little old Texas girl who got in trouble" to describe McCorvey during this time. This phrase was popularized by Marian Faux in her 1989 tell-all account of *Roe v. Wade* and attributed to McCorvey in the text. In context, the label is used to express McCorvey's shock that the Supreme Court would take the time to hear her case, as the justices were too important for such trivial matters as her "trouble"—read: unwanted

²³⁹ See Appendix figure 10. McCorvey, as noted in the first chapter, did not redact her rape claim until 1987.

²⁴⁰ In McCorvey's memoir, *I am Roe*, she misremembers the name of this character and mistakenly calls her "Ellen Campbell." The film's misrepresentation of her sexuality fueled her decision to publicly come out as a lesbian in 1989. McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 184, 195.

²⁴¹ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 35.

²⁴² *Ibid.* Five years later, McCorvey reflected on this tendency in *I am Roe*. McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 197.

pregnancy.²⁴³

It is unclear whether or not McCorvey ever uttered such a sentiment about herself. Faux provides no context for the quote.²⁴⁴ Both Linda Coffee and Sarah Weddington were interviewed for the chapter in which the phrase appears, but no citation is given for the phrase itself.

McCorvey used a similar descriptor in the 1996 pro-life documentary *Reversing Roe*, calling herself “a simple little old girl from Louisiana who thought she knew what she wanted,” but in context, this phrase is used to chastise her younger self for seeking out an abortion.²⁴⁵ Regardless of the term’s origins, its popularity as a descriptor for McCorvey speaks volumes. Most notably, it was quoted by elite writers trying to make sense of McCorvey: constitutional law scholar Laurence H. Tribe in *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes*, and feminist journalist Naomi Wolf in a controversial 1996 article centered on McCorvey’s conversion in *The New Republic*.²⁴⁶

The allure of the phrase is hardly veiled. It tamed McCorvey: she was simultaneously “little,” “old,” and girlish, a trifecta of non-threatening traits. She may have been in “trouble,” but she was savvy enough to know that referring to her pregnancy in more explicit terms—terms suggestive of pregnancy’s sexual origins—would be uncouth. Her regional identity was sweetened in this context. Stated this way, Texas was not “America’s cultural backwaters,” it was America’s heartland.²⁴⁷

Furthermore, like the image of McCorvey and Allred at the Supreme Court, this title

²⁴³ Marian Faux, *Roe v. Wade: The Untold Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Decision That Made Abortion Legal* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1989), 174.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, 328.

²⁴⁵ Norma McCorvey, *Reversing Roe: The Norma McCorvey Story*, Produced by Dan Doheney (Fredericksburg, VA: Doheney and Associates, 1996), VHS. Other than *Reversing Roe*, I have found no sources in which McCorvey uses this term or a similar one to describe herself.

²⁴⁶ Tribe, *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes*, 4-7; Naomi Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls: Rethinking Pro-Choice Rhetoric,” *The New Republic* (New York), October 16, 1995, 26. Wolf’s article, which centered on the moral and rhetorical failings of the pro-choice movement, gained traction among pro-life figures who saw it as an admission of guilt. The article will be explored in detail at the end of the chapter. For an example of a positive reaction to the article from a pro-life thinker, see Charles K. Bellinger, *Jesus v. Abortion: They Know not What They Do*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 301-304.

²⁴⁷ Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” 26.

reinforces the myth that McCorvey was actively involved in the *Roe* Supreme Court hearing. In a single sentence, McCorvey becomes as American as apple pie, an unassuming Cinderella swept up into a romance with the highest court in the land. The label stabilized the erratic, often symbolically contested McCorvey, simultaneously marking her as innocent and innocuous. It is notable that this feminizing phrase was used in two prominent publications shortly after McCorvey came out as a lesbian, a declaration that garnered far less publicity than her redaction of her rape claim, the attempted shooting in 1989, or her later conversion.²⁴⁸ Like the *Roe v. Wade* TV movie, it repackaged McCorvey in an appealing, approachable manner.

For McCorvey to remain a subject of public interest, either this illusory image would need to be maintained or it would have to be supplanted with a robust alternative. McCorvey's partnership with Gloria Allred initially seemed to provide her with a steady enough foundation to attempt such a metamorphosis. Allred was deeply invested in her client. Even after her conversion, McCorvey remembered her time working with Allred fondly. In *Won by Love*, she stated: "Gloria and I are now on opposite sides of the abortion issue, but I found her to be a woman with a sweet and gracious heart. She's the type of woman I admire."²⁴⁹ The appearance of this assessment in a text targeted at a pro-life audience speaks volumes about McCorvey's regard for her former lawyer.

Allred's ability to sympathize with McCorvey may have been due to similarities in their personal histories. While Allred became wealthy due to her work as an attorney on high-profile cases, she grew up in a working-class family in West Philadelphia. Like McCorvey, she married before the age 20 and had a child with an abusive husband. Before *Roe v. Wade*, she became

²⁴⁸ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 195. McCorvey mentions in the text that she came out as a lesbian in an unspecified California newspaper in 1989. Most responded positively to her disclosure, but she noted that some in the pro-choice movement felt that her lesbianism could hurt the pro-choice movement.

²⁴⁹ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 22.

pregnant due to rape and had to seek out an illegal abortion, from which she nearly died.²⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Allred was not oblivious to the expectations that the public had for the “Jane Roe” figure, nor the tensions that would need to be resolved in order to make McCorvey into a more empowering figure. Staying in the public eye required a makeover for the scrappy McCorvey. Under Allred’s supervision, McCorvey received public speaking lessons.²⁵¹ Images from this period show McCorvey attired in the occasional dress instead of her trademark overalls, makeup oftentimes adorning her usually unmade-up face. Evidence of Allred’s success in making McCorvey a media phenomenon can be seen in the boom in articles about McCorvey between 1989 and 1992, as well as her numerous media appearances and first book deal.²⁵²

One such article was penned by a remorseful Joseph N. Bell, author of the *Good Housekeeping* article that had popularized the *Roe* rape myth.²⁵³ According to this more humanizing profile of McCorvey, she relocated to California within a year of meeting Allred. There, she began dating a new woman after breaking up with Connie Gonzales and sought out a degree in order to become a paralegal. In fulfillment of a long-unrealized dream, she discovered the identity of the *Roe* baby, who was a girl, but they were not in contact with one another.²⁵⁴

While Bell had euphemistically referred to Connie Gonzales as McCorvey’s “kind,

²⁵⁰ *Seeing Allred*, directed by Roberta Grossman and Sophie Sartain (New York: Sundance Studios, 2018), <https://www.netflix.com/title/80174367>.

²⁵¹ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 196.

²⁵² Prager, “The Accidental Activist;” Belkin, “The Woman Behind the Symbols in the Abortion Debate;” Joseph N. Bell, “Jane Roe Settles into New Life of her Own,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1990; Connie Chung, “Abortion/ Louisiana/ Nationwide,” CBS Evening News, CBS, New York, WCBS-TV, June 19, 1991; Joseph N. Bell, “Caught In The Spotlight Of Roe V. Wade,” Sun Sentinel (Broward County, Florida), Oct. 25, 1992.

²⁵³ A year earlier, Bell published a panicky article in the *Los Angeles Times* which revealed his shock at learning that McCorvey had redacted her rape claim. He states, “For a brief period, I knew Norma McCovey [sic] very well—or thought I did—and I was startled by the statement in the Calendar story attributed to an NBC executive that ‘she lied’ when she said her pregnancy grew out of a rape. I have on tape 20 minutes of the most graphic description of that rape this side of ‘The Accused,’ and if McCovey [sic] indeed made it up, she should be running NBC’s entertainment division instead of Brandon Tartikoff.” Bell’s mention of “The Accused” is a reference to a 1988 movie about a woman seeking justice after a brutal, public gang rape. Joseph N. Bell, “Abortion Ruling by Supreme Court Had an Unlikely Catalyst,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2, 1989.

²⁵⁴ Bell, “Jane Roe Settles.”

compassionate, no-nonsense” landlady in his earlier *Good Housekeeping* article, McCorvey’s non-normative identity was allowed to be labelled for what it was—a lesbian relationship—in this installment of Bell’s McCorvey saga.²⁵⁵ Bell is not entirely flattering when remembering his impression of Connie Gonzales two decades earlier, mentioning that she was “tough, protective... [and] a lot more difficult to win over” than McCorvey had been during their initial 1973 meeting.²⁵⁶ Now that McCorvey had moved past this relationship (albeit temporarily), Bell reinterpreted McCorvey’s sexuality as a sign of her progress towards a more autonomous lifestyle rather than a maladaptive dependence on a stronger woman.

Of course, this moment was merely one in McCorvey’s uneven record. Despite brief glimpses of a shiny, new McCorvey, she continued to be seen as an embarrassment. On January 23, 1990, McCorvey was the keynote speaker at a pro-choice rally in San Francisco. An Associated Press article written about the event quotes McCorvey’s pro-choice platitudes but goes on to report that McCorvey also received a citation for putting “Roe” stickers on street signs as a prank.²⁵⁷

Even McCorvey’s beloved advocate, Gloria Allred, appears to have silenced her at times. On September 18, 1990, Norma McCorvey and Gloria Allred testified against the nomination of David Souter to the Supreme Court. According to the transcript of the hearing, Allred spoke on behalf of McCorvey, who remained silent.²⁵⁸ The significance of this event and McCorvey’s treatment is all the more notable as, according to the other feminist leaders who spoke on the panel (such as former NOW president Eleanor Smeal), Souter could potentially be the tiebreaker

²⁵⁵ Joseph N. Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” *Good Housekeeping* 176 Iss. 6 (New York) June 1973, 152. In this article, Connie Gonzales’s identity is thinly veiled by the pseudonym “Bonnie Hernandez.”

²⁵⁶ Bell, “Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade.”

²⁵⁷ Associated Press, “Rallies Commemorate Abortion Rulings,” January 23, 1990.

²⁵⁸ “Nomination of David H. Souter to be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States,” *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, United States Senate; 565.

in any case positioned to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.²⁵⁹

As the fissures between McCorvey's cultivated public persona and her day-to-day life continued to surface, her social class became a topic of contention once more. This struggle is particularly evident in the unflattering interpretations of her work as the figurehead of the Jane Roe Foundation. This organization was created in 1989 by a number of pro-choice lawyers and business people with McCorvey at the helm. It was tasked with the mission of helping "poor Texas women obtain legal abortions."²⁶⁰ As Joshua Prager notes in "The Accidental Activist," many of the foundation's founders were involved in an earlier attempted marketing scheme in which McCorvey signed copies of the *Roe* decision, which were then sold to the public. One, advertising executive Gus Clemens, is quoted as saying, "I think it's accurate to say that [we] were manipulating Norma, and that Norma was manipulating us."²⁶¹ For Prager, this event is merely one in a series of McCorvey's opportunistic abuses of her role as "Jane Roe." She was reportedly the sole beneficiary of the money raised for the Foundation at a star-studded 1989 fundraiser in Los Angeles, which was shuttered shortly afterwards and replaced by The Jane Roe Women's Center (JRWC).²⁶²

Two newspaper articles published in 1992 add uncomfortable, dehumanizing detail to Prager's version of these events. While Prager at least credited McCorvey with the intellectual capacity for manipulation, journalist S.J. Diamond depicted McCorvey as infantile at best in a

²⁵⁹ Will Dunham, "Souter Hearing turns Rancorous," *United Press International*, September 18, 1990.

²⁶⁰ Andrew Rosenthal, "Reporter's Notebook; 'Jane Roe' Has Part in a Drama of High Emotion," *New York Times*, April 9, 1989.

²⁶¹ Prager, "The Accidental Activist." Prager does not clarify what Clemens means by McCorvey manipulating him and the other executives, but the rest of the article strongly implies that McCorvey exploited abortion activists for financial gain.

²⁶² *Ibid.* McCorvey likely needed the money, as during this period in her life, making public appearances as "Jane Roe" amounted to a full-time job (particularly around *Roe*'s annual anniversary). It is, however, unclear how she ended up benefitting from the fundraiser or whether or not the organization was a 501(c)3. In "The Accidental Activist," Allred denies that she would have allowed the money to be used in this way, but a 1989 *New York Times* article claims she was responsible for organizing the benefit. For further information, see Lisa Belkin, "The Woman Behind the Symbols in the Abortion Debate," *New York Times*, May 9, 1989; Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 35.

scathing diatribe wordily entitled, “Where are they now? A Drifter, a Deadbeat, and an Intensely Private Doctor: Hardly heroes, these are the faces behind some of the most famous legal decisions in America.” In addition to labeling McCorvey a “drifter,” Diamond eviscerates her pro-choice activism. She describes her as “a nervous, weepy woman heavily dependent on a series of protectors to help her handle her association with the case.”²⁶³ Diamond’s use of the word “protector” suggests McCorvey was child-like, incapable of defending herself. Furthermore, the term is tinged with homophobic implications, as it hearkens back to Bell’s codependency-infused vocabulary to describe McCorvey’s relationship with Connie Gonzales in 1973 and 1989.²⁶⁴

Two of McCorvey’s former Jane Roe Foundation colleagues are interviewed in the article. Lawyer Tom Goff blamed Gloria Allred for “snatch[ing McCorvey] away from us,” suggesting that Allred was responsible for the failure of the Jane Roe Women’s Foundation, not, as Diamond suggested, the absent-minded McCorvey. Regardless of the culprit, Sarah MacCallister, another Jane Roe Foundation Partner, noted that McCorvey was simply not up to the challenge of being Jane Roe. She described McCorvey as “the consummate victim—the perfect candidate for the case, if not the perfect candidate to handle it.”²⁶⁵ There is no indication that Diamond reached out to McCorvey for her perspective, suggesting that Diamond felt these former partners were better equipped to speak of her life and work than she was.

Even the reformed Joseph N. Bell could not overlook the embarrassment of McCorvey’s humiliating antics in a follow-up to his glowing report of McCorvey’s life in California two

²⁶³ Diamond, “Where are They Now?”

²⁶⁴ Bell, “A Landmark Decision,” 152; Bell, “Jane Roe Settles.”

²⁶⁵ Diamond, “Where Are They Now?” Sarah MacCallister is identified as one of the leaders of the Jane Roe Foundation in a 1992 article written by Joseph N. Bell. Bell, “Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade.”

years earlier.²⁶⁶ While his 1990 profile highlights McCorvey's autonomy, suggesting a sort of self-actualization has occurred alongside her move to Orange County, Bell's 1992 sequel suggests that with her return to Dallas and Connie Gonzales, she fell back into old, regressive patterns. Unlike Diamond and Prager, Bell provides context by explaining the financial consequences of McCorvey's exodus from the organization as it had been funding her housing. Nevertheless, he follows Diamond's lead by describing her as maladjusted, remarking that "her insecurities are so deep-seated that she often drives away the few friends she does have." Her squabble with the organization's backers occurred due to a fight over "the furnishings in her office. Her anger had run out of control, and she had been fired."²⁶⁷ While Bell tries to be understanding about this "detour," he clearly sees this event as part of a predictable pattern for the "alternately angry and desolate" McCorvey.²⁶⁸

When she returned to Dallas in 1992 after being fired by the JRWC, McCorvey had to regroup. She possessed an inconsistent resume: a tenth-grade education and decades of janitorial and construction experience coupled with a working knowledge of abortion-related legislation and a background in public speaking that would have made her the envy of most left-leaning political aspirants. Eventually, she was able to find a career compatible with her symbolic significance and class status: she worked in several different abortion clinics during this time as a receptionist and telephone counselor, where she would likely have been paid \$6-7 per hour.²⁶⁹

McCorvey's stints in these clinics were short-lived as, in her own words, "the stress of dealing with dozens of anxious pregnant women every week stirred up too many memories all at

²⁶⁶ Bell, "Jane Roe Settles."

²⁶⁷ Bell, "Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade." Based on the timeline implicit in Diamond and Prager's articles, it is likely that the conflict which Bell describes in this article was between McCorvey and the leaders of the Jane Roe Women's Center, not the Jane Roe Foundation.

²⁶⁸ Bell, "Caught in the Spotlight of Roe v. Wade."

²⁶⁹ Adjusted for inflation, this would translate to approximately \$10-12 per hour in 2018.

once.”²⁷⁰ Journalist Debbie Nathan expanded upon this incident, noting that McCorvey’s behavior towards women and male partners who accompanied them was often “hostile.”²⁷¹ McCorvey tried to embody the spitfire persona that she thought was expected of Jane Roe, but she was fading. As she remarked in *I am Roe*, “The bad old Norma still makes appearances now and then... She’s quick, much too quick, to imagine that people are taking advantage or making fun of her. Then she loses her temper, and loses everything, just like in the bad old days.” It is hardly surprising that the turmoil that McCorvey faced resulted in volatility. Sandwiched between the hypocrisy of how the rhetoric of the pro-choice platform had played out in her own life and the compelling affective imagery of the pro-life movement, there was little room for her to breathe.

Her doubts about the ethics of abortion, as expressed to Charlotte Taft decades earlier, had not subsided.²⁷² She was struggling financially and emotionally; her mental and physical health were deteriorating.²⁷³ Hope came when former coworkers introduced her to Dr. Jasbir Ahluwalia, the director of A Choice for Women, who had offered to provide her with medical assistance. As Ahluwalia later recalled, when he first met the 47-year old McCorvey in 1994, “She looked like she was sixty years old! Run-down, depressed, crying, suicidal.”²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, he offered her a position at the clinic, and her partner Connie Gonzales also joined the staff.²⁷⁵

McCorvey found both an emotional outlet and a small boost to her finances from the

²⁷⁰ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 198.

²⁷¹ Nathan, “The Death of Jane Roe,” 38.

²⁷² For a discussion of McCorvey’s relationship with Charlotte Taft and her work at the Routh Street Clinic, see chapter 1.

²⁷³ Nathan, “The Death of Jane Roe,” 38.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Other than Dr. Ahluwalia’s quote, there is no concrete evidence about what physical or mental health issues McCorvey was dealing with at this time. It is likely that she was dealing with addiction, although this is difficult to verify as her own account in *Won by Love* is filled with internal contradictions regarding her drug and alcohol use between 1989 and 1997. See McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 2, 119, 122-123.

²⁷⁵ See Appendix figure 11.

publication of her first memoir, *I am Roe*, in 1994.²⁷⁶ Though mediated through the pen of her co-author, freelance writer Andy Meisler, McCorvey finally had the time, liberty, and space to tell her side of the *Roe* story and its aftermath. The resulting record of McCorvey's life was praised for its emotional vulnerability. It was listed as one of *The New York Times's* "Notable Books of the Year," and historian James Mohr lauded McCorvey's unique contributions to the broader record of *Roe* in the *Journal of Women's History*.²⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, McCorvey's self-representation in *I am Roe* was not universally celebrated. Taken to task as recently as 2013 for the factual inaccuracies that pepper the text, the most searing critique came from novelist Susan Cheever who reviewed the book in *The New York Times*.²⁷⁸ Cheever took it upon herself to shatter the mythology that McCorvey was a sort of "feminist Joan of Arc" in the introduction of her review, calling her "an angry shadow from the dark side of the American dream." Cheever's review implied that McCorvey's life was so far removed from the mainstream that it was practically incomprehensible, stating that "her story could have happened to many young women in a country where the rights of women and children are still under attack."²⁷⁹ It takes little imagination to assume that Cheever was thinking of a nonwhite nation located in the Global South. Such a statement obscured the possibility that the rights of a poor, white, lesbian woman could still have been under attack in the United States in 1994.

Throughout her review, Cheever reduces McCorvey to a tragic curiosity. At best, she allows McCorvey to be a sort of cautionary tale, a living reminder of a nation's sins. This much

²⁷⁶ See Appendix figure 12.

²⁷⁷ James Mohr, "Sexuality, Reproduction, Contraception, and Abortion: A Review of Recent Literature," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 1 (1996): 183.

²⁷⁸ Joshua Prager's article, "The Accidental Activist," makes note of two instances where McCorvey may have misremembered or altered facts, including the alleged shooting in 1989. It is unclear whether these instances were intentional misconstructions or merely evidence of the fallibility of McCorvey's memory, particularly as over two decades had lapsed since McCorvey had become the *Roe* plaintiff.

²⁷⁹ Susan Cheever, "An Accidental Symbol" *New York Times*, July 3, 1994.

is made clear with the truism that comprises the closing line of the review, as she declares that “Norma McCorvey as Jane Roe is not the symbol we would have chosen; but she is the symbol we deserve.”²⁸⁰ This statement positions McCorvey soundly outside of the center. She was not part of Cheever’s demographic, the world of highly educated east-coast metropolitan liberal elites. Cheever, therefore, could not even conceptualize of including McCorvey when she spoke as a single person representing a collective whole. At best, the poor, lesbian McCorvey, who lived in a “backwards” part of the nation, could at best be a reminder for the educated elite of how bad things were and could be, not an icon of choice in her own right.

While the sentiments that Cheever expressed were damning, her discomfort with McCorvey was not unusual among more affluent, educated, white women who encountered her. Lynn Barrett, a prominent Dallas feminist activist who worked with McCorvey around this time is quoted in Debbie Nathan’s 1996 article “The Death of Jane Roe” as saying, “I’ve tried to empathize with Norma. But she’s so different, she might as well be from Ethiopia.”²⁸¹ Considering the tumultuous political climate in Ethiopia in the early 1990s, this comment suggests that Barrett could not reconcile the idea that she and McCorvey occupied the same sociopolitical world. Furthermore, this statement all but explicitly implied that Barrett found McCorvey’s whiteness to be so illegible, she may as well have been black. The two resided in the same city, yet Barrett’s reading of McCorvey’s race suggest that Barrett could not even comprehend this possibility primarily due to how McCorvey represented their shared white racial identity.

²⁸⁰ Cheever, “An Accidental Symbol.” A few weeks later, a *Times* reader criticized Cheever for the more offensive aspects of the review in a letter to the editor. The author remarked, “It’s reassuring for us to have an educated, privileged woman like Susan Cheever put the “real” Jane Roe—Norma McCorvey—in her place, or keep her there by the faithful summary of self-damning elements in her story, unmodified by any sympathetic overview, excepting a single sentence at the end.” See Jill Johnston, “A Feminist Heroine? Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1994.

²⁸¹ Nathan, “The Death of Jane Roe,” 31.

Another possible reading of the racial dynamics at play is that Barrett was disturbed by McCorvey's performance of whiteness as it made her own racial identity visible. Barrett almost explicitly verbalized this tension in the same article, noting that she found McCorvey's statement that "she was 'just a white woman trying to get by'" distasteful.²⁸² According to sociologist Ashley W. Doane, Barrett's discomfort with McCorvey's mention of racial whiteness may have not been unusual, as white Americans in the 1990s overwhelmingly did not demonstrate self-awareness about their racial identity.²⁸³ In this instance, the fact that such a sentiment came from a poor white lesbian woman with tremendous political and symbolic clout seems to have further perturbed the respectable Barrett. It both rendered her own race visible and drew attention to the discrepancy between her privilege and McCorvey's lower status.

Like Cheever's exclusion of McCorvey in her platitude about "the symbol *we* deserve," Barrett's discomfort here is another prime example of elite white women shuddering at the prospect of welcoming McCorvey into their ranks. Taken together, these assessments of McCorvey suggest that both her poverty and her particular presentation of whiteness rendered her unpalatable to those in a position to benefit most from legalized abortion in the early 1990s: urban, educated, middle class and affluent white women.²⁸⁴ Furthermore, this speaks to the double-bind that constricted McCorvey since 1970: her class and her race put her in a position to be the *Roe* plaintiff, yet not to benefit from it.

Such sentiments confirm McCorvey's fear that she was perceived as "white trash," and

²⁸² Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 31.

²⁸³ Ashley W. Doane, "White Identity and Race Relations in the 1990s," in *Perspectives on Current Social Problems* ed. Gregg Lee Carter (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 151-152.

²⁸⁴ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 31. Despite abortion's legality, it was still easier for middle and upper-class women to receive abortions after *Roe* as the Hyde Amendment (1976) and *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989) prevented the use of Medicaid and public funding for abortions. As Sarah Weddington's story demonstrates, it was far easier for middle-class and affluent women to obtain illegal abortions before *Roe* than it was for poor women.

therefore, hierarchically below the educated white women with whom she worked.²⁸⁵ These concerns speak to the historical and often unspoken divide between whites which have taken on different forms throughout U.S. history. As historian Nancy Isenberg argues, “a certain ambiguity” surrounded poor and working class white identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. “Redneck, cracker, and hillbilly were simultaneously presented as an ethnic identity, a racial epithet, and a workingman’s badge of honor; yet for those who did not identify with these labels, poor whites were uncouth at best and backwards, sexually perverse bigots at worst.²⁸⁶ Few were able to tread this line adroitly. One of the outliers in this regard was Bill Clinton. During his presidential campaign and time in office in the early to mid-1990s, he managed to strike a palatable compromise in the eyes of the left-leaning American public. He adopted a folksy white “leisure self”: an ethnic and classed identity that could be assumed at will, not interfering with a more presidential image.²⁸⁷

McCorvey was not as skilled at slipping in and out of a classed persona, a reality which haunted her self-evaluation in *I am Roe*. She grappled with this impasse in her memoir by playing up an imagined divide between “Jane Roe” and Norma McCorvey. The two converse with one another, with the former regularly emerging in superheroic fashion to encourage McCorvey to confront her fears and fight for women’s rights. This is most blatant in the section in about her decision to go public as Jane Roe:

Did I want to go public? Did Norma McCorvey? Did Jane Roe?

No. Norma McCorvey was a scared and angry cleaning woman, a person who was just trying to get through the day without crying or shouting or drinking herself unconscious... But then, from somewhere deep inside me, somewhere surprising, the other woman - the one whose name was on the Supreme Court papers, and someday, maybe, in the history

²⁸⁵Nathan, “The Death of Jane Roe,” 35.

²⁸⁶ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 291.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

books - raised her voice.

'Yes,' whispered Jane Roe.²⁸⁸

While framed with inspiring language, sections such as these suggest that McCorvey and “Roe” were and remained separate figures. At no point do the two identities merge. McCorvey herself admitted at the end of the text that, “Deep inside, I’m still nobody but Norma McCorvey.”²⁸⁹

Despite glimmers of hope, McCorvey seemed painfully aware that she would always be marked and limited by her class status. Shortly after this statement, she conceded that “maybe I am the most famous cleaning woman in America.”²⁹⁰ While somewhat less infantilizing than the label of “some little old Texas girl who got into trouble,” this phrase nonetheless reduced McCorvey to a flattened stereotype of her gender and class.

In Marian Faux’s *Roe v. Wade* (1989), she assigns this label as well as the credit for the phrase to McCorvey herself: “As she herself likes to say, she is perhaps ‘the most famous cleaning woman in America.’”²⁹¹ In contrast to Faux’s optimistic assessment, McCorvey seems to adopt this title reluctantly. It comes as a deflated afterthought, following a cursory explanation of why she had recently been fired from her position at an abortion clinic. Shame about her class identity, rather than pride about her working-class status, pervaded both McCorvey’s self-assessment and representation by others while she was a pro-choice figure.

While McCorvey was regrouping in Dallas, an organization was attempting the same: Operation Rescue. Operation Rescue was badly battered, but not destroyed outright during the early 1990s. Two major legal decisions decimated OR’s ability to carry out its usual tactics. In 1994, the organization was sued by NOW and convicted of breaking the Racketeer Influenced

²⁸⁸ McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 171-172.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²⁹¹ Faux, *Roe v. Wade*, 328.

and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law, and subsequently required to repay three times the amount in damages that it had caused to clinics which members protested. Secondly, President Clinton signed a new Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, which translated into a year of incarceration and up to a \$10,000 fine for rescuers. Members left in droves, and the leadership began to fracture.²⁹²

Randall Terry faced particularly steep fines due to his leadership of Operation Rescue, and as part of a settlement with NOW, he had to step down as leader in 1990. A prominent rescue movement leader, Keith Tucci took over as Director, passing on the title to Rev. Flip Benham shortly afterwards in 1994.²⁹³ Both Tucci and Benham faced infighting within OR's ranks. Many OR members, taking seriously the idea that abortion was a form of genocide, espoused the use of violent tactics against abortion providers.²⁹⁴ While both Benham and Tucci saw the use of violence as antithetical to OR's mission, the organization was assumed to be associated with the violent acts of former members and unrelated pro-life groups. This association was cemented by a string of murders by pro-life activists in the early to mid-1990s, including the murders of Dr. John Britton and his escort Lt. Col. James H. Barrett by former OR member Paul J. Hill in 1994 and clinic workers Shannon Lowery and Leanne Nichols in 1993 and 1994.²⁹⁵

Seeking a clean break with these more violent activists, Flip Benham moved the OR headquarters from Binghamton, NY to Dallas, TX in 1994, where he had previously led the OR

²⁹² Mark Allan Steiner, *The Rhetoric of Operation Rescue: Projecting the Christian Pro-Life Message* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 10.

²⁹³ "Meet the Director," *Operation Save America*, accessed January 14, 2018, <http://www.operationsaveamerica.org/misc/misc/aboutUs.html>.

²⁹⁴ Steiner, *The Rhetoric of Operation Rescue*, 11.

²⁹⁵ Ginsburg, "Rescuing the Nation," 236. For more information about the use of deadly violence against abortion providers in the 1990s, see Liam Stack, "A Brief History of Deadly Attacks on Abortion Providers," *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2015; "Violence Statistics and History," *National Abortion Federation*, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://prochoice.org/education-and-advocacy/violence/violence-statistics-and-history/>.

Dallas/ Fort Worth branch.²⁹⁶ Flip Benham was the quintessential New Christian Right and pro-life leader. An army veteran and former saloon owner, he converted to Christianity in 1976. Following his conversion, he was ordained as minister in the evangelical Free Methodist tradition in 1980.²⁹⁷ He found a second calling in 1982 when he began working with pro-life ministries, including crisis pregnancy centers and the rescue movement.²⁹⁸ As a pro-life leader, he cultivated a virile persona, in keeping with OR's "muscular Christian" influences.²⁹⁹

Benham's finest achievement came following his return to Dallas. The struggling OR had trouble finding an ideal office space after moving, but, by their own account, God intervened. A landlord sympathetic to their cause offered them a rent-free office space next-door to A Choice for Women, where Norma McCorvey had recently begun working.³⁰⁰ While Benham insisted that this move was divine intervention, not a strategic decision, there is reason to cast doubt on his assertions.³⁰¹ Benham had singled McCorvey out as a target soon after moving the organization to Dallas, organizing a band of activists to surprise her with antagonizing questions during the Q and A at a book signing for *I am Roe*.³⁰² Furthermore, one strategy of pro-life Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs), in which Benham first acquired his pro-life activist experience, was to acquire office space near abortion clinics and adopt similar names to those of clinics to effectively target women seeking abortions.³⁰³

On the day that OR moved in next door to A Choice for Women, McCorvey was not

²⁹⁶ "Meet the Director, *Operation Save America*.

²⁹⁷ Ibid. The Free Methodist church is an offshoot of Methodist church which is more conservative than its counterpart, the United Methodist tradition.

²⁹⁸ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 73-74.

²⁹⁹ The hypermasculine representation of Flip Benham will be addressed in Chapter 3 in the analysis of *Won by Love*, in which he appears as a central figure. For examples, see McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 8, 57.

³⁰⁰ "Abortion Foes Move Next to 'Roe's' Clinic," *New York Times*, April 1, 1995.

³⁰¹ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 65-68.

³⁰² Ibid., 48-49.

³⁰³ Joanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe: Abortion after Legalization* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 180. Crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) first emerged in the 1960s, and have grown to number over 3,000 as of 2009. Their main goal is to provide pro-life counseling for pregnant women in order to dissuade them from seeking abortions. For more information, see Karissa Haugeberg, *Women Against Abortion*, 9-34.

content to remain silent. She called the press, making it clear to OR that she would not stand for their presence on her turf.³⁰⁴ But Benham and McCorvey did not remain enemies for long. After Benham called off a protest at McCorvey's insistence, they struck up an unlikely friendship.³⁰⁵ They regularly chatted about theology, with Benham schooling McCorvey in Evangelical Christian theology and McCorvey responding in turn by sharing facets of her New Age worship, which included theology about goddesses and rituals inspired by indigenous religions. The two even appeared on the *Today Show* together, a trip that Dr. Jasbir Ahluwalia, the director of A Choice for Women, helped fund.

Within a few months, McCorvey was attending church services with OR volunteers. She eventually converted.³⁰⁶ On August 8, 1995, she made her internal transformation visible to the world at large when she was baptized in a backyard pool in Garland, TX. While Flip Benham was adamant that this event was merely a sign of her spiritual transformation, this did not stop him from inviting a film crew from the local news to broadcast the ceremony.³⁰⁷ Her partner, Connie Gonzales, initially expressed wariness about Benham and OR. But she followed McCorvey's lead later that year. Both quit their jobs at the abortion clinic, spending their days working at the next-door Operation Rescue offices instead, where they assisted with office work and OR's political actions.³⁰⁸

In the immediate aftermath of McCorvey's conversion and baptism, her symbolic value did not automatically shift to the pro-life movement. This ambiguity is most clear in her August 10, 1995 appearance on *Nightline*. A chaotic uncertainty permeates the segment. In an attempt to fairly evaluate the aftermath of her conversion, hosts Ted Koppel and Cokie Roberts featured the

³⁰⁴ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 39.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁰⁶ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 155-161.

³⁰⁷ Phone interview with Flip Benham, October 2017.

³⁰⁸ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 39.

opinions of both pro-choice and pro-life leaders, including Gloria Allred, Kate Michelman, who was then the president of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), as well as Helen Alvare of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Flip Benham.

While most of the pro-choice leaders dismissed the idea that McCorvey's conversion would have a serious impact on public discourse on abortion, Michelman expressed her fear that "the anti-choice movement will just have a field day with this and exploit it... for all it's worth." The two pro-life figures took polarized positions on the issue. Benham soundly denounced the idea that McCorvey was any sort of "pro-life figurehead," emphasizing that "she is a born-again Christian; she is a new creation." Alvare was less guarded, noting that McCorvey's conversion could have "an educational impact" as well as "an emotionally converting impact" on the public. The collage of opinions suggests that, following McCorvey's conversion, her place in the abortion debate remained sharply contested.³⁰⁹

What is most telling is McCorvey's unfiltered assessment of her own conversion. She did not use the interview to promote a pro-life platform as, at the time, she still supported abortions in the first trimester. Rather, she used the segment to voice her spite for her former allies, stating that she felt that she has been "shunned" by pro-choice leaders, who thought she was "totally stupid" because she was a "street kid," not "Vassar quality." In particular, she felt that she was silenced because she was "a loose cannon." Ted Koppel took on the role of the devil's advocate in the interview, tactfully noting that McCorvey was "not exactly the ideal role model," but she soundly rebuked him. She emphasized that she saved all her money to get an abortion, even going to an illegal clinic where she was unable to receive an abortion as it had been shut down. Her greatest animus was reserved for Sarah Weddington, who "needed [her] plaintiff to be

³⁰⁹ Ted Koppel and Norma McCorvey, *Nightline*, American Broadcasting Company, August 10, 1995.

pregnant” and, as McCorvey pointed out, failed to refer her to the abortion clinic that she herself went to years before meeting her client.³¹⁰

As time passed, McCorvey fully adopted the pro-life platform, and journalists’ interest in her began to wane. Out of this silence emerged one of the more sympathetic, yet misguided, attempts to reconcile McCorvey’s decision with the “clash of absolutes”: Naomi Wolf’s essay, “Our Bodies, Our Soul.” In this piece, which appeared in *The New Republic* on October 16, 1995, Wolf argued that the loss of McCorvey to the pro-life cause was a symptom of a cancer within the pro-choice movement: the loss of an ethical core by refusing to accept the humanity of the fetus. Wolf’s essay is an almost Judeo-Christian call to moral and societal reform. She advocates that women take responsibility for their bodies, castigating those women who have the means to prevent pregnancy, but choose not to do so.³¹¹ She does not absolve herself of responsibility in the process, referring to her own decision years earlier to take the morning-after pill as “not my finest moment... I chose myself on my own terms over a possible someone else, for self-absorbed reasons.”³¹² She recognizes her own class privilege, stating that

That potential baby, brought to term, would have had two sets of loving middle-income grandparents, an adult mother with an education and even, as I discovered later, the beginning of diaper money for its first two years of life (the graduate fellowship I was on forbade marriage but, frozen in time before women were its beneficiaries, said nothing about unwed motherhood).

While she excuses poor and working-class women for having abortions, her ideas remain within the realm of utopic. Ultimately, she envisions a feminist society where “gender as a barrier has

³¹⁰ For a discussion of Weddington’s decision not to refer McCorvey to an abortion clinic, see chapter 1. Weddington and McCorvey’s accounts of their early meetings also address this point in their respective memoirs. Weddington, *A Question of Choice*, 11; McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 118.

³¹¹ Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” 32.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

become a dusty artifact,” and consequently, abortion is so rare, it is treated with the same reverence afforded to the death of an infant.³¹³

Idealistic as this ideal may be, Wolf’s logic in regard to McCorvey crumbles on the first page as she treats McCorvey with utmost reverence, yet uses hypocritical, elitist language to discuss the ideas associated with those who are morally opposed to abortion. As such, she entangles McCorvey in a carefully disguised classed binary. She is careful to address the arguments that have been used to dismiss McCorvey, such as her “insecurity, fickleness, and need for attention.” In contrast, Wolf prizes McCorvey, framing her in quasi-religious terms. Her conversion is considered a “revelation” and an “object lesson for the pro-choice movement—a call to search our souls and take another, humbler look at how we go about what we are doing.”³¹⁴

Yet Wolf echoes the exact language she is careful to avoid when speaking of McCorvey in the opening of the essay. The text begins with an epigraph penned by a single mother who claimed she was haunted by “baby furies” (angry ghouls of Greek mythology) after having an abortion. In a bait-and-switch, Wolf reveals that the woman was not a “benighted, superstition-ridden teenager lost in America’s cultural backwaters.” Rather, she was an Ivy-league educated physician and a staunch proponent of women’s rights.³¹⁵ Wolf cannot reconcile the fact that two women of diverse educational and class backgrounds could possibly experience similar reactions to abortion— unless abortion itself was a moral failing.

Wolf’s essay fails to imagine a feminist platform that could accommodate Norma McCorvey and women like her. In an attempt to come to terms with the “clash of absolutes,”

³¹³ Wolf, “Our Bodies, Our Souls,” 35. As of 2012, Wolf considered herself to be pro-choice “with many caveats.” See “Q&A: Feminist author Naomi Wolf,” *Al Jazeera* (France), Aug. 24, 2012.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

Wolf merely dresses up pro-life messaging in a pro-choice costume. She does not move beyond the flattened, moralized playing field of abortion rhetoric in the mid-1990s. By remaining entrenched in the realm of language and ideology, both the practical considerations and the philosophical concerns that fueled McCorvey's choices remain obscured. She is "reduced to ghostly anonymity" once again: emptied of her experiences, infused with a saint-like status, and tangled in another unforgiving, dehumanizing binary.³¹⁶

Norma McCorvey felt that the pro-life movement could offer her a more humanizing alternative. They themselves were eager to welcome their new member to the fold. As McCorvey tearfully remarked in an interview in the 1996 documentary *Reversing Roe*, "The pro-lifers have shown me what it's like to be a human being for the very first time in my whole life. They've loved me, they've nurtured me, and they've cared for me."³¹⁷ Torn between two polarized positions on one of the most hot-button topics of her lifetime, she was left with no room to express herself without invoking censure. It is little wonder, then, that she would find solace through a blanket rejection of the pro-choice platform. For better or for worse, the disaffection that McCorvey felt made her far-better suited to the reactionary pro-life movement and the New Christian Right. This new sense of belonging; however, would prove to be a mixed blessing as the stabilization of McCorvey as a political symbol would eventually diminish her relevance in the abortion debate.

³¹⁶ Tribe, *Abortion*, 5.

³¹⁷ McCorvey, *Reversing Roe*.

Chapter 3 | “She was Christ risen for our sins”: Norma McCorvey as Pro-Life Icon, 1995-2017

The pale brightness that bathes Norma McCorvey in the photo could have been borrowed from any number of icons of the Virgin Mary. As it cascades down her face, it erases the lines that crisscross her forehead, softening the creases at the corners of her eyes. She is dressed simply, her checkered dress revealing its humble origins through its slightly off-kilter seams. But she does not seem to mind, or notice— she is in prayer, or on some other plane, hand clasped round a small, unassuming cross pendant. If you look closely, you can just barely make out the engraving: Dt. 30:19, an eight-character reminder of one of her favorite Bible verses: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.”³¹⁸ A divine command to choose life: it is hard to imagine a verse better suited to Norma McCorvey’s unconventional religious and political journey.

This simple pendant, like McCorvey herself, had undergone a radical transformation. As Flip Benham remembered decades later, it had been an occultic symbol or rune, given to McCorvey years before they met, when she was still “Jane Roe.” Following her conversion, she relinquished it to Benham as one of the many steps in the shedding of her self-professed “heathen” past.³¹⁹ What McCorvey saw as a mark of shame, Benham interpreted as an opportunity. He had it melted down, recast as a cross, and engraved. Like her baptism, it was,

³¹⁸ Deuteronomy 30:19; referenced in Norma McCorvey and Gary Thomas, *Won by Love: Norma McCorvey, Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade, Speaks Out for the Unborn as She Shares Her New Conviction for Life* (Nashville, Tenn: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997), 124.

³¹⁹ Ilene Findler and Meaghan O’Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, performed by Norma McCorvey and Connie Gonzales, New York: Cinemax Reel Life, 1998.

“an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”: McCorvey’s conversion in object form.³²⁰

In keeping with the glorious chaos of Norma McCorvey’s life, this image appears alongside that of female gang members, celebrities, and Supreme Court justices in Annie Liebovitz’s landmark photography collection, *Women* (1999).³²¹ At this point in McCorvey’s life, she was a fresh convert once again, this time to Roman Catholicism (a 1998 decision which Liebovitz alluded to through the iconographic composition of the photo). Its stillness suggests a marked change from McCorvey’s time in the pro-choice movement, a settling that would have been unimaginable five years earlier.

Despite the unlikeliness of transforming a poor, lesbian woman into the image of pro-life figurehead, McCorvey forged a distinct role for herself within this movement in the two and a half decades before her death. Pro-life rhetorical tactics, which utilized class-related discontents, gendered messaging, and theological concepts to inspire political action, were ideally suited for McCorvey’s unique story. But this move was not without compromise. McCorvey’s conversion domesticated her public image: she was no longer subject to the same degree of fascination or scrutiny, all but fading away from the limelight.³²² This double-bind freed her to actively fight for anti-abortion legislation on her own terms, but resulted in her being largely forgotten, except by those who clung to her as their figurehead.

As Eileen MacNamara, a journalist for the *Boston Globe* pondered a week after McCorvey’s conversion was publicized, “In embracing its new symbol, will Operation Rescue edit out Norma McCorvey's refusal to disavow a woman's right to first-trimester abortions? Will

³²⁰ This phrase, which provides a definition of a sacrament, is attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo.

³²¹ See Appendix figure 13; Annie Liebovitz and Susan Sonntag, *Women* (New York: Random House, 2000), 138-139. McCorvey’s 1998 conversion to Roman Catholicism and the complicated reasons behind this decision will be explored later in this chapter.

³²² I use the term “domesticated” here to refer to the taming of McCorvey’s public image through her cultivation of a new image that suggested that she had assimilated to the gendered and sexual mores of the NCR.

the antibortion movement welcome Connie Gonzales, Norma's longtime lesbian lover, at rallies in its fundamentalist Christian churches?"³²³ As MacNamara implied, McCorvey's assimilation to the pro-life platform would require a number of both minute and seismic changes to her public persona. The first question would be answered almost immediately, as in a move that garnered relatively little press, McCorvey began to reject the morality of all abortions within weeks of her conversion.³²⁴

The second quandary was not as easily resolved. Even from her earliest work with OR, McCorvey seemed acutely aware that her lesbian sexuality was verboten within the pro-life movement, and contended with this problem in a number of subtle ways. In a brief documentary created to showcase McCorvey's new religious and political convictions, *Reversing Roe* (1996), she coded herself as straight by playing up her attraction to Flip Benham, fawning over him and calling him "dashing."³²⁵ Elsewhere, she remarked that they were careful to "never get too close to each other, for some reason we know that this is like a cardinal rule."³²⁶ Simply appearing straight was not enough. McCorvey was also mindful of the fact that any perceived impropriety between the two of them would be nearly as unacceptable as her lesbianism.

These comments speak to a number of implicit expectations within the pro-life movement. First, they allude to the role of compulsory heterosexual monogamy.³²⁷ This emphasis on married heterosexual unions translated into a level of concern about the conduct of married persons with members of the opposite sex. Most famously remembered as "the Billy Graham rule," (although more formally entitled "The Modesto Manifesto") many male leaders of

³²³ Eileen MacNamara, "Human Complexities Make Smooth Symbolism Difficult," *The Boston Globe*, Aug. 18, 1995.

³²⁴ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 180-186.

³²⁵ Norma McCorvey, *Reversing Roe: The Norma McCorvey Story*, Produced by Dan Dohoney (Fredericksburg, VA: Dohoney and Associates, 1996), VHS.

³²⁶ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe*.

³²⁷ Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 52-53.

the New Christian Right refused to meet one-on-one with women (and vice-versa).³²⁸

McCorvey's early acknowledgement of this social more suggests that she immediately recognized that she would need to distance herself from any association with lesbianism (or sexual behavior with a married man) in order to be a viable pro-life figure.

As journalist Debbie Nathan noted in a sympathetic article on McCorvey's conversion in the *Village Voice* in 1996 entitled "The Death of Jane Roe," Gonzales moved past her distrust of Benham soon after McCorvey's baptism. She joined her long-term partner as a pro-life activist sometime before April of 1996, a move that required a certain delicacy due to the couple's sexuality. Nathan stated, "Although [McCorvey] and Gonzales still live together, she says they no longer have sex together and that they were never 'really' gay. Gonzales concurs with this revisionism."³²⁹ Despite Gonzales's change of heart, the NCR's prevailing understanding of acceptable sexualities meant that McCorvey's continued cohabitation with Gonzales and former self-identification as a lesbian were hardly seen as cause for celebration.³³⁰

The realities of McCorvey and Gonzales's relationship oftentimes diverged from the public face that the two presented, which would translate into tensions between McCorvey and OR leaders between 1995-1997. Luckily for both women, OR's leadership, including Benham, initially extended some leeway towards the new converts. They allowed them to continue living together, only encouraging them to separate after the two had been self-professed Christians for a while.³³¹

³²⁸ Seth Dowland, "The 'Modesto Manifesto,'" *Christian History Magazine* 111, (Worcester, PA), 2014.

³²⁹ Debbie Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," *Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 30, 1996, 31.

³³⁰ According to *I am Roe*, McCorvey came out as a lesbian in 1989. Articles written about her after this time openly refer to her relationship with Gonzales (as well as a brief relationship with an unidentified woman in California) accordingly. Norma McCorvey and Andy Meisler, *I Am Roe: My Life, Roe V. Wade, and Freedom of Choice* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 195; Joseph N. Bell, "Jane Roe Settles Into New Life of Her Own," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1990.

³³¹ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe*.

McCorvey's gender presentation, on the other hand, was contested and reshaped in accordance with the standards of the pro-life community from the start. This transformation was more rhetorical than physical in nature. As Debbie Nathan remarked in 1996, "she looked much funkier than the times I'd seen her in makeup, dresses, or pantsuits, back in the days when she was the pro-choice Jane Roe."³³² Yet, in language that diverged from the more humanizing rhetoric that comprised the earlier portions of the article, Nathan observed that McCorvey had already carved out a rhetorical spot for herself in the movement within a year of her first conversion.

At the end of the article, she waxed poetic about McCorvey's class, education, and capacity to be a pro-life symbol, stating: "Thus was the educated, self-assured, powerful Jane Roe sacrificed, and the unschooled, damaged, and prostate Norma McCorvey beatified—no, deified. She was Christ risen for our sins, yet she still seemed all too human, and solemn, as though trying to forgive wrongs too big for her understanding."³³³ The manipulations Nathan observed McCorvey making to her class and gender presentation were particularly clear in one of McCorvey's earliest pro-life speaking engagements.

On the twenty-third anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, in January of 1996, McCorvey was a featured speaker at a commemorative rally once again: this time, one attended by some of her most powerful former nemeses.³³⁴ McCorvey gave a brief speech about her conversion, which opened a joke about "Jane Roe" dying on the day of her baptism. Ironically, the comment was met with thunderous applause from the pro-life audience. Following the speech, she was joined on stage by a horde of predominantly white male speakers, including OR founder Randall Terry. Terry embraced McCorvey, and announced, "I believe I speak for all of us when I say, we

³³² See Appendix figure 14; Nathan, *The Death of Jane Roe*, 32.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ See Appendix figure 15.

forgive you, in Jesus's name."³³⁵ While it would be a stretch for Terry to claim that anything McCorvey had done had explicitly caused an injury to anyone in that room, other than a few choice insults leveled at OR members before her conversion, such a declaration reveals that both Terry and McCorvey were playing roles with a clear power differential.³³⁶

It is tempting to see this instance as a sign of the pro-life movement mistreating McCorvey in a different, albeit no less harmful manner than that which she had experienced in the pro-choice movement. Such a reading would ultimately miss a key way in which the theological underpinnings of the pro-life movement enabled McCorvey to take on a new role. This scene bore thematic resemblances to many New Testament stories about Christ's redemptive acts, such as the story of the woman caught in adultery, or the story of the Samaritan woman at the well.³³⁷

Both of these stories depict a marginalized woman who clearly had a sinful past coming face-to-face with Jesus Christ, who treated each individual woman with compassion, forgiveness, and acceptance. In this regard, a Biblical archetype was readily open to McCorvey. Terry had the Christ-like power to absolve McCorvey of her spiritual wrongdoing in *Roe*, and McCorvey could earn a place at the table by performing the requisite penitence to receive Terry's peace offering. Because of this symbolic role, McCorvey could be the public face of the movement without upsetting the gendered hierarchy of OR's male-dominated leadership.

In theory, this trope could indefinitely provide McCorvey with a role in the pro-life movement. It was an apt choice, certainly more suitable to the impetuous McCorvey than the

³³⁵ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe*.

³³⁶ Nathan, "The Death of Jane Roe," 29.

³³⁷ John 8:1-11; John 4:4-42.

obvious alternative, a saint-like, Marian ideal.³³⁸ McCorvey proved this herself in March of 1996, when she got into a skirmish with Tina Gannon, an employee at her former workplace, A Choice for Women, over a parking spot. According to the police, she “bumped Tina Gannon's van with her car and then pushed the woman down.” Gannon was not injured, but McCorvey faced a fine of up to \$500 for her actions.³³⁹

While this incident did not make it into McCorvey's post-conversion memoir, *Won by Love*, she did admitted to pulling a number of pranks on the employees at her former workplace in the book. These ranged from terrorizing her former boss by whispering at him through the vents (which were shared with those at OR's headquarters), to sneakily answering the phones at the clinic as “the ex-executioner” when she would stop by to meet Gonzales at the end of her work day (before Gonzales herself quit her job at the clinic).³⁴⁰ These stories are recounted without a hint of chagrin in the text, suggesting that pro-life leaders with may have overlooked or even encouraged such behavior.

McCorvey's initial sense of enthusiasm with the pro-life community was tempered in April of 1996, when she, Benham, and a large number of rescuers went to Chicago in an attempt to shut down the city's abortion clinics. In a graphic turn of events which was captured by the filmmakers of a documentary on McCorvey, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, the protesters held a funeral for an aborted fetus named Sarah. McCorvey was visibly upset by the opening of the casket containing the fetus, and refused to pay her respects along with the other activists. Despite McCorvey's shock, this was by no means an unusual protest tactic. Historian Johanna Schoen notes that, since OR's earliest protests, rescuers “fetishized the fetus and systematically escalated

³³⁸ This rhetorical choice may have had racial underpinnings as well. In *White*, media scholar Richard Dyer poetically refers to the Marian archetype (and its attendant ideals of chastity and self-sacrifice) as “a thumbnail sketch of the white ideal.” Given McCorvey's complicated representation of racialized whiteness, this form of self-presentation would have been an ill fit for many reasons. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 17.

³³⁹ Associated Press, “This Time, It's Roe vs. Abortion Clinic Worker,” March 17, 1996.

³⁴⁰ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 198-200.

antiabortion tactics.”³⁴¹ This graphic display of a fetus was not yet familiar to McCorvey. “I just couldn't do it,” she said when later interviewed about the incident. Overwhelmed by guilt and shame, she hovered by the sidelines while an identified volunteer comforted her.

McCorvey would have a chance to find a cathartic release from this guilt on March 23, 1997 through a public performance of her grief at the National Memorial for the Unborn in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This event was notable as it marked one of McCorvey's first activist appearances independent of OR, as she started working for her own ministry, Roe no More, in collaboration with former OR member Ronda Mackey.³⁴² Mackey had become friends with McCorvey in 1995 when OR first moved in next to A Choice for Women. Publicly, McCorvey claimed that she made this decision as she was not “cut out for the intense confrontations that regularly greeted Operation Rescue volunteers.”³⁴³ Elsewhere, McCorvey linked this move to her and Mackey's shared desire for greater self-determination in their activism.³⁴⁴ In an interview with CNN, her new ministry proved to be the perfect rebuke to those who claimed she was being exploited by the pro-life movement, as she noted that using herself would be impossible.³⁴⁵

While these factors were certainly at play, another personal conflict factored in the equation. McCorvey's thinly veiled partnership with Connie Gonzales was no longer being tolerated by OR's leaders. To facilitate their breakup, Benham approached McCorvey, offering to buy her a house so that she would no longer live with Connie Gonzales.³⁴⁶ McCorvey initially entertained their offer. As this event chipped away at the illusion that McCorvey was

³⁴¹ Joanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe: Abortion after Legalization* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015), *Abortion After Roe*, 151.

³⁴² McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 232-234.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 234. In *Won by Love*, the beginning of Roe no More marks the end of both women's work with OR.

³⁴⁵ Douglas S. Wood, “Who is Jane Roe?,” *CNN.com Law Center*, Jan. 1997, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/LAW/01/21/mccorvey.interview/>.

³⁴⁶ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe*.

unequivocally welcome in the pro-life movement, OR leaders did not speak openly about this new condition for McCorvey's continued work with OR.

Interviews featured in *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, a documentary which was created by a team of female filmmakers who recorded McCorvey and Gonzales between 1994-1997, help fill in the gaps in OR's official record. In separate interviews filmed in 1997, McCorvey and Gonzales reveal their fraught feelings about the offer. Gonzales recalled her feelings on the night she learned that McCorvey was planning on leaving her: "...she told me she was gonna buy a house. And she said, what do you think about it, and I said, 'It's great.' Needless to say I couldn't finish my dinner." Her usual stoicism was no defense against the realization that her new faith might spell the end of her partnership with McCorvey.

In her interview, McCorvey openly grappled with the implication that she could not live a "Christian lifestyle" while living with her partner of twenty-seven years. "Connie will always be there, and I know that. I love her, and she loves me," she reflected. "This is my home, and just because my heart has turned to Jesus, and has turned to God, it doesn't mean that I'm gonna love God or Jesus any more if I live someplace else."³⁴⁷ These moments are rare glimpses of the cracks between McCorvey's facade as a pro-life spokesperson and her quiet reservations of what such a role entailed. Traces of rebellion can be found in her actions. She eventually rejected OR's offer, living with Connie until the two split up years later.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Findler and O'Hara, *Roe v. Roe*.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.; Joshua Prager, "The Accidental Activist," *Vanity Fair*, February, 2013, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2013/02/norma-mccorvey-roe-v-wade-abortion>. In *Tough Love: Sexuality, Compassion, and the Christian Right*, scholar Cynthia Burack notes that, after the recorder was turned off during a 1996 interview with a prominent OR leader, he revealed that he would support abortion if a gay gene was discovered. Burack argues that this leader resolved the "clash of abomination perspectives on abortion and same-sex sexuality by privileging his horror of homosexuality over his hatred of abortion." As this person was a prominent member of OR's leadership during McCorvey's exodus from the organization, this disclosure reveals that no matter how celebrated McCorvey's conversion was, her sexuality presented an impasse. Cynthia Burack, *Tough Love: Sexuality, Compassion, and the Christian Right*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 59-60.

Founding her own ministry gave McCorvey a chance to be freed from the expectations of OR's leadership while remaining active in the pro-life movement. The dedication of plaques at the National Memorial for the Unborn also marked her first major joint effort with Sandra Cano, the formerly anonymous plaintiff of *Doe v. Bolton*.³⁴⁹ In 1989, Cano became involved in Operation Rescue, redacting her initial support for abortion and claiming that she had been tricked into signing the *Doe* affidavit by her lawyers. Cano continued to work as a pro-life activist until her death in 2014. As Cano was never as widely associated with legalized abortion as McCorvey was, her defection to OR, pro-life activism, and death garnered less publicity.³⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in certain regards, her work as a pro-life figure would prove to have broader-reaching implications than McCorvey's ever would.³⁵¹

This memorial was a fitting place for the two women to meet and make a statement together. Formerly the location of an abortion clinic, the site itself was a palimpsest.³⁵² The clinic had been shuttered in part due to the work of pro-life activists, including members of the rescue movement.³⁵³ Since the memorial was built in 1995, it has been inextricably linked to the idea that abortion is a trauma akin to the death of a loved one. According to memorial's website, it serves as a "place of closure" where "loss and grief can be shared with others who have suffered

³⁴⁹ This collaboration was organized by Allan Parker, a lawyer who represented McCorvey pro-bono for much of the latter third of her life and was behind her 2004 challenge to *Roe v. Wade*, *McCorvey v. Hill. A Cold Day in Hell*, directed by Randall Terry (2017; Victorious Lady Productions), Streaming Video.

³⁵⁰ Articles about Cano's defection to OR include David Treadwell, "Abortion Plaintiffs Now on Opposite Sides: Similar Pasts, Different Viewpoints for Roe, Doe," *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1989; Mark Curriden, "Doe vs. Bolton: Mary Doe Has a Change of Heart, Pickets Abortion Clinics," *American Bar Association Journal* 75, no. 7 (1989): 26.

³⁵¹ David J. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality: the Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994), 603-604; Jeannie Suk, "The Trajectory of Trauma: Bodies and Minds of Abortion Discourse," *Columbia Law Review* 110, no. 5 (2010): 1233.

³⁵² "About Us," *National Memorial for the Unborn*, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.memorialfortheunborn.org/about-us>.

³⁵³ "About Us- Complete History," *National Memorial for the Unborn*, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.memorialfortheunborn.org/about-us?showall=&start=1>.

similarly, a place where the unborn can be honored and remembered in a tangible way.”³⁵⁴ It is notable that the memorial is designed to commemorate both abortions and miscarriages, suggesting that the loss of a fetus is tragedy regardless of the cause.³⁵⁵

McCorvey and Cano’s plaques echo this language of loss, trauma, and grief. McCorvey’s plaque framed her as a sort of war criminal in the “holocaust” of abortion. It reads: “I publicly recant my involvement in the tragedy of abortion. I humbly ask forgiveness of the millions of women and unborn babies who have experienced the violence of abortion.” While Cano maintained that she was innocent, as she had never sought out an abortion, her plaque also emphasized the necessity of making reparations. It stated, “I stand today in this place of healing... and pledge to the memory of these innocent children, that as long as I have breath, I will strive to see abortion ended in America.”³⁵⁶ What is most remarkable about these plaques is that, despite their thematic resemblance to the mission of the memorial, neither woman ever received an abortion.

This grief-infused language is reflective of a broader rhetorical tactic that was central to pro-life messaging: the concept of post-abortion regret. This idea was championed by female pro-life activists who co-opted psychological and feminist terminology to explain their opposition to abortion. Initially, they based their argument on a distrust of medical professionals, claiming they sought to manipulate vulnerable women, rather than focusing on the well-being of the fetus.³⁵⁷ The eventual emergence of the post-abortion regret narrative shifted the focus away

³⁵⁴ “Honor Your Child,” *National Memorial for the Unborn*, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.memorialfortheunborn.org/honor-your-child>

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ “Roe v. Wade Revisited,” *National Memorial for the Unborn*, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.memorialfortheunborn.org/about-us/roe-v-wade-revisited>.

³⁵⁷ Karissa Haugeberg, *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 40.

from the sinfulness of the abortion procedure or the sanctity of human life, redirecting the attention on the emotions (namely, guilt) experienced by the women who received abortions.³⁵⁸

In a fascinating turn of events, this concept became so widespread that McCorvey and Cano's regret about their role as plaintiffs became associated with post-abortion regret. This elision was so successful that at least one scholar has mistakenly argued that Cano and McCorvey's emotions stemmed from their regret of having received abortions.³⁵⁹ The two components of post-abortion regret—manipulation by an exploitative professional and the inevitable guilt which follows—clearly resonated with Cano and McCorvey. Both were consistent themes in their pro-life speeches and writing.

A variation on this trope, post-plaintiff regret, took on a distinctive form in McCorvey and Cano's speeches and writing, including their plaques and remarks at the memorial on March 23, 1997.³⁶⁰ A sense of being tricked by the professional elite (in these cases, lawyers rather than abortion providers) appear in both women's public apologies. Both argued that their cases were built on lies: in McCorvey's case the fabricated rape, and in Cano's case, her desire for an abortion in the first place. Despite the claim that they were manipulated and deceived, there is a pervasive sense of wrongdoing. As McCorvey noted at the end of her speech, "I will forever be ashamed. But Jesus has saved me from the tentacles of this horrible lie... My body does not belong to me, it belongs to him who has saved me for this purpose."³⁶¹ So complete was her rejection of her earlier position, she even abandoned the idea of her own bodily autonomy: the

³⁵⁸ Haugeberg, *Women Against Abortion*, 40-41.

³⁵⁹ Joanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe: Abortion after Legalization* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 149.

³⁶⁰ I will use this term to refer to the two women's use of the rhetorical underpinnings of post-abortion regret in order to adequately differentiate their experiences from those of women who received and regretted their abortions.

³⁶¹ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 242.

foundational premise of the pro-choice movement.³⁶²

This philosophical facet of her past was not the only one which McCorvey now openly rejected. The extent of her purported assimilation to the pro-life movement and NCR was codified in her second memoir, *Won by Love*, which was co-authored by Evangelical pastor and author Gary Thomas. Thomas's voice clearly dictates the narrative of McCorvey's spiritual journey in this text as it bears a remarkable resemblance to the conversion narratives of other pro-life leaders and New Christian Right leaders. In *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right*, political scientist Michael Lienesch argues that spiritual autobiographies were one of the key ways in which leaders of the NCR performed political work. Lienesch identifies a tripartite formula which prominent leaders' conversion narratives follow, along with a number of common themes that emerge in these stories. First, a sense of personal sinfulness must be described, along with an attendant sense of isolation or loneliness. Then, the moment of salvation occurs accompanied with a feeling of rebirth. After this, the newly converted faces trials, but has a sense of living a holy life "in a sinful world."³⁶³

In *Won by Love* (1997), McCorvey's conversion forms the climax of the text.³⁶⁴ This structuring marks her as an inheritor of a pre-existing literary tradition. The first step in McCorvey's conversion, her sense of personal sinfulness, is portrayed in an emotionally heightened and feminized manner, drawing attention to her vulnerable mental state before her conversion. This emotional maelstrom permeates her description of her life as "Jane Roe," pro-choice activist and abortion clinic worker. As she recalls early on in the text, "I was deathly afraid of anyone hearing me cry. I was supposed to be Jane Roe, superhero of the abortion

³⁶² This association between support for abortion and women's rights was not an historical constant. Mary Ziegler argues that this shift occurred in the aftermath of *Roe*. Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 97, 111-113.

³⁶³ Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 24.

³⁶⁴ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 155-161.

movement. I wasn't supposed to be weak. I wasn't supposed to have deep regrets when women thanked me for giving them the right to abort five or six babies. I wasn't supposed to have feelings, but I did. And they hurt."³⁶⁵ As this reminiscence follows McCorvey's recollections of appearing at a pro-choice rally, it suggests that McCorvey's need for spiritual transformation predated her run-ons with OR in Dallas.

While McCorvey's rural, poor, Southern upbringing made her an outlier in the pro-choice movement, these factors made her ideally suited to a career as a NCR figurehead. As Lienesch notes, familial instability, negligent fathers, poverty during childhood, and, in the case of Southerners, a "sense of living on the social periphery runs deep."³⁶⁶ McCorvey's traumatic childhood and youth are explored in less detail in *Won by Love* than *I am Roe*; however, the language used to describe her past immediately marks her as an authentic outsider. In a section on her appearance at the *Webster v. Reproductive Services* rally in Washington D.C. in 1989, she explains:

My pedigree, apparently, was an embarrassment to the Vassar-degreed lawyers. My grandmother had made a living as a prostitute and then, as she grew older, a fortune-teller. My mother was an alcoholic Roman Catholic, my father a Jehovah's Witness and television repairman. I'm part Cajun and Cherokee Indian with a ninth-grade education. When people talk about "pumps," I assume they're referring to gasoline, not shoes.

This reinterpretation of a painful memory, which she discussed in far rosier terms in *I am Roe*, allowed her to reclaim her working-class heritage as a precursor to her acceptance in the NCR rather than simply the root cause of her rejection by pro-choice leaders.

Lienesch's tripartite formula is ultimately most useful for interpreting McCorvey's failure to immediately reject abortion as immoral following her conversion. In Lienesch's analysis, the conversion act is not complete in and of itself. It is followed by a final stage,

³⁶⁵ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 16.

³⁶⁶ Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 31-32, 43-44.

vocation, in which the penitent is confronted with a renewed awareness of their imperfection, which is matched by a commitment to a new, divinely appointed mission.³⁶⁷

This particular turn in the conversion narrative provided McCorvey with a convenient out following her embarrassing *Nightline* appearance. While she may have touted the wrong message about abortion, this was not a sign that she was still aligned with the pro-choice movement. Rather, in the words of Flip Benham, it was evidence of the fact that she was still “a baby Christian,” and therefore, exempt from the scrutiny that mature Christians would be subject to.³⁶⁸ McCorvey indicated that she felt immense shame about this misstep in *Won by Love*, but luckily for her, this error could easily be explained away as a developmentally appropriate fumble in her spiritual journey.³⁶⁹

McCorvey’s “vocation” moment, or as she frames it, her “full pro-life conversion” occurred about a week after her *Nightline* appearance (according to *Won by Love*).³⁷⁰ While volunteering at the OR headquarters and attempting to dodge further attention from the media, McCorvey noticed a poster that had fallen on the floor. As she gazed upon this pictorial depiction of fetal development, she remembered, “the progression was so obvious, the eyes were so sweet. It hurt my heart, just looking at these unborn children.”³⁷¹ In that moment, McCorvey realized, “*That’s a baby!* It’s as if the blinder fell off my eyes, and I suddenly understood the truth.”³⁷² In this moment, McCorvey’s conversion and vocation were complete.

Gender, sexuality, and race are manipulated throughout *Won by Love* to depict pro-life activists as true American defenders of liberty while pro-choice forces are foreign, greedy, and sexually perverse. As Carol Mason argues, the “Jewish doctor/ lesbian nurse” duality pervades

³⁶⁷ Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 37.

³⁶⁸ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 185.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 180-186.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 195.

pro-life propaganda of this era: “the Jewish doctor is, in these cases, interpellated as a leading conspirator against life. And he has a partner in his conspiracy: his nurse, assistant, or business associate, who is consistently seen as lesbian.”³⁷³ This non-Christian, un-American, sexuality non-normative pair is the perfect threat to the traditional family. Mason applies this observation to *Won by Love*, buttressing her claim through her study of “Arnie,” the doctor of the clinic where McCorvey works. Arnie uses his foreign medical degree to financially exploit women, tricking them into costly procedures which will coincide with his goal of killing off American children.³⁷⁴ While he is not explicitly Jewish, his foreignness and greed are combined to perpetuate anti-Semitic, xenophobic stereotypes.

From the start, Flip Benham is positioned as Arnie’s moral and physical foil. McCorvey remarks, “Whereas I could have picked up Arnie with one hand, I’d need a truck to move Flip, who is built like a stocky surfer and is over six feet tall.”³⁷⁵ Benham’s pro-life work is depicted as a labor of love. McCorvey remarks that he “works for a substandard wage, lives in a very modest home, and spends the best hours of his day on behalf of the unborn.”³⁷⁶ As flagrant as this manipulation is, Arnie’s wealth and Benham’s humble means create a clear association between their ethics and class. What Benham lacks in financial resources, he possesses in masculinity and moral superiority.

McCorvey compensated for her non-normative sexuality throughout *Won by Love*. In this version of her life, she and Gonzales were former lovers and current roommates, not sexually active lesbians:

³⁷³ Carol Mason, *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 172.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 182-183.

³⁷⁵ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 8.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

Some years ago, Connie and I had been lovers, but our relationship had been completely platonic since 1992, though we still shared a home. To be honest, I had grown weary of the homosexual lifestyle. Connie and I had been friends before we ever became lovers, and now that I was "grown up" and no longer worried about getting pregnant by another man, I simply had no desire to continue a sexual relationship.³⁷⁷

This explanation not only justifies McCorvey's continued cohabitation with Gonzales, it casts doubt on the validity of non-normative sexual identity in the first place. As Carol Mason notes in *Killing for Life: the Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics, Won by Love* depicts lesbianism as "an immature, inadequate, and sinful response to the challenges of heterosexuality and its potential consequences for women, that is motherhood."³⁷⁸ Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that McCorvey's renunciation of lesbianism was "disingenuous" as she and Gonzales rejected OR's implied demand that the two end their relationship.³⁷⁹

In the text, as in life, McCorvey manipulated her gender presentation to imply that her compliance with NCR ideals was more complete than it was in reality. An early indication of this assimilation was hinted at in the nickname Flip Benham assigned McCorvey: "Miss Norma." This moniker constructed McCorvey as youthful, genteel, and worthy of the deference afforded to members of her sex: a far cry from the feisty persona which she presented to the world. This feminizing label reflected ideals about women and gender among members of the NCR. According to historian Randall Balmer, women of the NCR were seen as "the highest form of God's creation," a position which was to be fiercely protected by appropriately manly, muscular Christians.³⁸⁰ Furthermore, this nickname reconstructed McCorvey's southernness as genteel rather than retrograde. By calling McCorvey "Miss Norma," Benham rearticulated her as an obedient Christian woman even before she desired such a manner of existence for herself.

³⁷⁷ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 10

³⁷⁸ Mason, *Killing for Life*, 180.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Randall Balmer, "American Fundamentalism: The Ideal of Femininity," in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, 47-62 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47-48.

Throughout *Won by Love*, there are hints which indicate that, upon converting, McCorvey assumed more feminine mannerisms. In a comical interlude which took place shortly before McCorvey's baptism, Ronda Mackey talks McCorvey through the logistics of baptism. During the conversation, Mackey asks McCorvey, "You don't wear a bra, do you, Norma?"³⁸¹ After McCorvey responds "I haven't owned one of those for thirty years," Mackey tactfully suggests that McCorvey should wear something under her shirt on the day of the baptism, as she will be fully submerged in the water, rendering her shirt see-through.³⁸² McCorvey follows Mackey's advice, even electing to shave her legs on the day of the ceremony.³⁸³ At this critical moment in her spiritual transformation, she not only shuns her spiritual past, but begins to cleanse herself of the physical markers of feminist identity.

McCorvey's conversion, then, frees her not only spiritually, but marks her turn away from the devilish influence of "lesbian nurse[s]." While Mason explicitly uses this archetype to describe how McCorvey is depicted, the other pro-choice women described in the text are portrayed as greedy, queer, and gender non-normative. These traits are most blatantly expressed in a flashback to McCorvey's pro-choice activism via her testimony with a panel of other feminists at David Souter's Supreme Court confirmation hearing. Eleanor Smeal, Kate Michelman, Molly Yard, and Faye Wattleton, whom McCorvey refers to as "the usual crowd," appear alongside McCorvey and Gloria Allred.³⁸⁴ The women snub McCorvey throughout, which McCorvey attributes to their jealousy that she got to be Jane Roe, not them.

Despite the fact that this event occurs before McCorvey's conversion, she is depicted as the arbiter of morality in a depraved subculture. At the end of the hearing, McCorvey responds to

³⁸¹ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 169.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

Kate Michelman's disapproving stare, telling her to "Save it... You all think you're guys anyway. You said you had an abortion because your husband left you." After the event, McCorvey recalls that "I might have looked like a hick, but I got that woman. I put her in her place."³⁸⁵ McCorvey's rebuke of Michelman capitalizes on a grain of truth—the pro-choice movement's elitism towards McCorvey—but anachronistically reenvisions the scene as one in which McCorvey proves her superiority by asserting the gendered values of the NCR. In this version, McCorvey's working class status, like Benham's rejection of wealth for a life of ministry, is constructed as a sign of integrity rather than her diminished value. This message spoke to a core value of the NCR, and its ideological cousin, the pro-life movement, as NCR ideologies reflected a sense of disaffection with the liberal elite, coupled with a feeling of being alienated from mainstream American culture.³⁸⁶

Paradoxically, following the publication of *Won by Love* and the early successes of *Roe no More*, McCorvey was flourishing financially. According to Benham, she earned \$80,000 from the publication of her second memoir, which bolstered her annual salary of \$40,000 from her ministry.³⁸⁷ This likely marked the first time in McCorvey's life when she rose above working class status, at least in terms of her personal finances, as the median income in 1998 was \$38,885.³⁸⁸ While Benham derided McCorvey's use of the pro-life platform for financial gain, such behavior was by no means unusual among public figures in the NCR. Ideologies such as the "prosperity gospel," the belief that faith in God would translate into financial success, found particular popularity among the working class. While some NCR leaders, most notably televangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker, used this gospel to manipulate their working class

³⁸⁵ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 44-46.

³⁸⁶ Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, 44.

³⁸⁷ Prager, "The Accidental Activist."

³⁸⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, *Money Income in the United States: 1998*, P60-206, Current Population Reports, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999, accessed March 31, 2018, xvi, <https://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/p60-206.pdf>.

devotees, McCorvey turned this trend on its head by using it to temporarily catapult herself into a higher class status.³⁸⁹

Professionally, McCorvey continued to exercise her power to shape the direction of her pro-life activism. On January 21, 1998, she took a reworked version of her speech at the National Memorial for the Unborn to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary for their hearings on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*.³⁹⁰ Excerpts of her remarks to the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Federalism, and Property Rights directly quoted her earlier speech, namely, her insistence that *Roe* was “based on a lie,” and that she was Coffee and Weddington’s “most willing dupe.”³⁹¹ Despite their similarities, McCorvey clearly knew her audiences on both occasions. The speech at the memorial was infused with theological precepts that would have been well-received by a pro-life audience. Her testimony to the subcommittee, by contrast, utilized thinly veiled pro-life talking points. Over the course of her two page speech, she used her experiences as the *Roe* plaintiff and work in abortion clinics to advocate for more stringent requirements for abortion clinic sanitation, stricter counseling and informed consent requirements, increased funding for crisis pregnancy centers, and an end to intact dilation and extraction (referred to as “partial birth abortion” within the pro-life movement).³⁹²

This period of total self-determination would be short-lived. On August 17, 1998, three years after her baptism, McCorvey was welcomed into Roman Catholicism in a private

³⁸⁹ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 287.

³⁹⁰ As McCorvey was not allied with a prominent pro-life organization at this point in her life, it is difficult to tell whether or not she had assistance in writing her remarks or her earlier speech at the National Memorial for the Unborn. It is possible that Ronda Mackey or Allan Parker, who were more experienced activists, provided McCorvey with guidance when crafting these speeches.

³⁹¹ US Senate, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Federalism, and Property Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, 105th Cong., 2d sess., “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*: Has It Stood the Test of Time?,” January 21, 1998, J-105-72, 44-45; McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 241-242.

³⁹² US Senate, “The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*,” 44-46, Schoen, *Abortion After Roe*, 219-220.

ceremony presided over by Father Frank Pavone.³⁹³ McCorvey attributed this move to a desire to return to a faith tradition which had been familiar to her during her childhood. In a publication released about her conversion to Roman Catholicism published by Priests for Life, the pro-life group which Pavone was associated with, she noted that attending Catholic Church was one of the few positive memories she had from her childhood.³⁹⁴ Flip Benham had a different interpretation. During an interview with Benham, he remarked that Fr. Pavone let McCorvey do what she wanted—namely, she was able to get speaker’s fees.³⁹⁵

It is likely that the truth lies somewhere in between these two opinions. Years after McCorvey’s confirmation, Pavone established himself as a “rising star in the antiabortion movement,” according to *Village Voice* journalist Jennifer Gonnerman.³⁹⁶ Given Pavone’s success, McCorvey’s nearly twenty-year long alliance with Pavone (and by extension, Priests for Life), was a strategic decision. The fact that such a change of heart was even a possibility speaks to a seismic shift in the history of religion in the United States, as centuries-old barriers between Catholics and Protestants softened.

As sociologist James Davidson Hunter argues, “religiously based special agenda organizations,” which centered on specific reforms divided sharply along liberal and progressive lines bridged denominational divides and politicized many of the concerns that defined the “culture wars”: the period of struggle over polarizing visions of American society that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁹⁷ McCorvey herself echoed this ideology. In a document entitled “My Journey into the Catholic Church,” she and Pavone stated, “The pro-life movement is perhaps the clearest and strongest arena for practical ecumenism in our day. People whose differences in

³⁹³ See Appendix figure 16; Norma McCorvey and Fr. Frank Pavone, “My Journey into the Catholic Church,” *Priests for Life: Educational Resources*, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/brochures/myjourney.htm>.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Phone interview with Flip Benham, October 2017.

³⁹⁶ Jennifer Gonnerman, “Father Frank’s Crusade,” *Village Voice* (New York, NY), May 22, 2001.

³⁹⁷ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 104-106.

doctrinal matters are real and important nevertheless join hands to preserve and defend the most fundamental gift of God, that of life itself.”³⁹⁸ While not all Protestant and Evangelical pro-life pundits celebrated McCorvey’s turn to Catholicism, this decision did not dethrone her from a place of prominence within the pro-life movement.³⁹⁹

Most of McCorvey’s work following her turn to Catholicism consisted of speaking gigs for private events. As Joshua Prager noted in his *Vanity Fair* profile of McCorvey in 2013, she was tasked with the mission to “Glorify God in all we do. Raise lots of money.”⁴⁰⁰ Glimpses of her fusion of the rhetorical strategies that fueled her earlier pro-life activism, namely, post-plaintiff regret, with a more explicitly Catholic pro-life platform can be found in her increasingly rare public appearances between 1998 and 2017.

McCorvey’s embrace of this Catholic pro-life ideology can be seen in her 2004 appearance on BBC’s *HARDtalk*. During the course of the aptly named talk show, she was grilled by the host, Tim Sebastian, for her politically contradictory past. No detail, from her suicide attempts to her claims of being exploited by pro-choice leaders, was left untouched in the course of the dense 24-minute segment. While Sebastian clearly attempted (and at times, succeeded) in poking holes in McCorvey’s political opinions, she remained stalwart in her stance on abortion, rebuking him with a combination of stubbornness and snark.

When pressed about whether or not abortion was incompatible with Christianity, she firmly repeated, “I agree with the Ten Commandments and all the teachings of the Catholic church.” Other opinions that she expressed—most notably, her feelings of being exploited by Sarah Weddington and pro-choice leaders—remained similar at heart, but introduced new and likely fabricated claims. She insisted that, when she signed on to be the *Roe* plaintiff, her lawyer

³⁹⁸ McCorvey and Pavone, “My Journey.”

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

had told her that “if abortion was made legal in the state of Texas, that that would probably put an end to rape and incest.” This conspiracy theory-like view seems extreme, but the element of deception fits neatly within the rhetoric of post-plaintiff regret, which made appearances throughout McCorvey’s rebuttals.⁴⁰¹

Towards the end of her *HARDtalk* interview McCorvey asserted her “right to change [her] mind,” informing Sebastian that she had filed a suit in Dallas in one of several attempts to overturn *Roe*.⁴⁰² He scoffed at the idea, asking, “You seriously think you have a chance?” But McCorvey remained undeterred. Unfortunately for her, Sebastian was right. Her suit, *McCorvey v. Hill*, was decided on September 9, 2004 by the fifth circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals. While McCorvey’s challenge to *Roe* was unsuccessful, Judge Edith H. Jones penned a concurring opinion which clearly showed the influence of post-abortion regret on the justice system. As Jones argued:

There are about a thousand affidavits of women who have had abortions and claim to have suffered long-term emotional damage and impaired relationships from their decision. Studies by scientists... suggest that women may be affected emotionally and physically for years afterward and may be more prone to engage in high-risk, self-destructive conduct as a result of having had abortions.⁴⁰³

McCorvey lost this particular battle but emerged victorious nonetheless. Years later, the Supreme Court’s 2007 *Gonzales v. Carhart* decision, which upheld the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act introduced by Congress and President George W. Bush in 2003, would transform post-abortion regret into law.⁴⁰⁴

In between, McCorvey testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee once more,

⁴⁰¹ Tim Sebastian, "Norma McCorvey: Roe v. Wade Abortion Case," *HARDtalk*, BBC News, London, 2004.

⁴⁰² See Appendix figure 17.

⁴⁰³ *McCorvey v. Hill*, 385 F.3d 846 (5th Cir. 2004).

⁴⁰⁴ Jeannie Suk, “The Trajectory of Trauma: Bodies and Minds of Abortion Discourse,” *Columbia Law Review* 110, no. 5 (2010): 1194-1195. The plaintiff in *Gonzales v. Carhart* was US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales (not to be confused with Connie Gonzales).

this time joined by Sandra Cano. The June 23, 2005 hearing was entitled “The Consequences of *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton*.”⁴⁰⁵ Post-plaintiff regret, with its attendant sense of being duped by liberal elites, formed the basis of both women’s arguments. In Cano’s testimony, she claimed that her journey to Oklahoma during her pregnancy was not a getaway trip to flee law enforcement officials who sought to arrest her husband. Rather, she was trying to “avoid the pressure” from her attorneys to get an abortion that she did not want.⁴⁰⁶ She demanded answers of the senators, asking, “How did my divorce and child custody case become the basis for bloody murders done on infants thriving in the wombs of their mothers? How can cunning, wicked lawyers use an uneducated, defenseless pregnant woman to twist the American court system in such a fraudulent way?” Although Cano had willingly attended the district court hearing for *Doe v. Bolton*, this repackaging of her past rendered her free of any blame for abortion’s legalization. She was a victim, pure and simple, defenseless against the machinations of her “cunning, wicked” attorneys.⁴⁰⁷

McCorvey, who had spoken widely of her futile quest for a safe and legal abortion as a pro-choice activist, could not claim the sort of innocence which was available to the more private Cano. Nevertheless, she tried, turning the onus onto her former attorneys. “My lawyers were looking for a young white woman to be a guinea pig for a new social experiment. I wanted an abortion at the time, but my lawyers did not tell me that I would be killing a human being,” she argued. “I was living on the streets. I was confused and conflicted about the case for many years, and while I was once an advocate for abortion, I would later come to deeply regret that I was

⁴⁰⁵ See Appendix figure 18.

⁴⁰⁶ US Senate, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Property Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, 109th Cong., 1st sess., *The Consequences of Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton*, June 23, 2005, J-109-28, 6.

⁴⁰⁷ David J. Garrow reported in *Liberty and Sexuality* that Cano went to Oklahoma because she was on the run with her husband, who was at large for theft. During this time, her lawyers arranged for her to get an abortion, but she rejected the operation as she had passed the point of quickening. Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 444-445.

partially responsible for the killing of between 40 and 50 million human beings.”⁴⁰⁸ In

McCorvey’s retelling of Roe’s history, her vulnerability to the nefarious machinations of Coffee and Weddington were due to her poverty and homelessness rather a desire to end her pregnancy.

Furthermore, McCorvey portrayed *Roe* as a racialized, eugenicist plot. Her whiteness was not incidental; rather, it was a prerequisite for her lawyer’s “social experiment.” Later in her testimony, she echoed these ideas by referring to legalized abortion as a “holocaust.” This rhetorical turn operated on two levels, as McCorvey used her own whiteness to capitalize on both the disenchantment of working class whites *and* hearken back to the racism-tinged origins of the pro-choice movement in the anti-population growth movement.⁴⁰⁹ This sense of being exploited by the professional elite would have found resonance among the white working class, as a shared sense of being looked down upon by highly-educated, affluent whites was a painful recurring experience.⁴¹⁰ Simultaneously, she depicted the pro-choice movement as racially and politically retrogressive rather than the pro-life platform.⁴¹¹

Ultimately, Sandra Cano became linked to the most powerful application of post-abortion (and post-plaintiff) regret. An amicus brief written in her name, in which her testimony is linked to that of 180 women who claimed to regret their abortion, was mentioned as a deciding factor in Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion in the 2007 Supreme Court case *Gonzales v. Carhart*. As the court’s prior ruling regarding the health of the mother in *Doe v. Bolton* was central to the argument that the ban on intact dilation and extraction was unconstitutional, Sandra Cano, a team

⁴⁰⁸ Committee on the Judiciary, “The Consequences of Roe and Doe,” 7-8.

⁴⁰⁹ Ziegler, *After Roe*, 97, 111-113.

⁴¹⁰ Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 26-27.

⁴¹¹ As Carol Mason argues in *Killing for Life*, McCorvey’s racially infused rhetoric may have also enforced white supremacist ideas. She points out that McCorvey appeared as a speaker at the 1998 Jubilation, an event hosted by The Jubilee, a Christian organization dedicated to restoring those of white descent to power. Mason clarifies that McCorvey “in no way deserves to be labeled a white supremacist;” however, the rhetoric she uses in *Won by Love* “no doubt resonates with white supremacist language.” Mason, *Killing for Life*, 185.

of pro-life lawyers, and 180 women who had previously had abortions penned an amicus brief in support of the ban which they sent to the Supreme Court.

Cano's personal letter, in which she entreats the justices to protect women from the trauma of abortion, appears as an appendix to the brief. She begins the letter by revealing that she was the anonymous "Mary Doe" of *Doe v. Bolton* and then recounts her lawyers' alleged deception, claiming that they tricked Cano into signing the affidavit in the Doe case by presenting it to her as divorce papers.⁴¹² Cano asserts that she had no idea of her role in the case and that it took her years to finally access the sealed court documents which confirmed that she indeed was the "Mary Doe" of *Doe v. Bolton*.⁴¹³

The scant sources available on Cano, especially before her turn to pro-life activism, make it difficult to verify these statements. However, their facticity is certainly questionable.

According to David Garrow's meticulously researched *Liberty and Sexuality*, Cano sought out and was denied an abortion in April of 1970. The *Doe* lawyers, who aided Cano in helping divorce her then-husband Joel Bensing and obtain visitation rights with her two older children, also did the logistical work to help her receive an abortion. She elected not to follow through with the procedure since she could feel the fetus moving.⁴¹⁴

Cano's letter takes an emotional turn as she expresses the remorse that she feels as her name and identity have been used to support legalized abortion. She reinterprets the argument that considering the "health of the mother" is a form of care for women. Calling this rationale "a false compassion," she argues that true compassion should take the form of increased paternal

⁴¹² Brief of Sandra Cano, the Former "Mary Doe" of *Doe v. Bolton*, and the 180 Women Injured by Abortion as Amicus Curie at in Support of Petitioner, *Gonzales v. Carhart*, 550 U.S. 124, 3 (2007) (No. 05-380).

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹⁴ Garrow, *Liberty and Sexuality*, 444-445. Cano gave the *Doe* baby, Melissa Able, up for adoption, but the two later reconnected. As an adult, Able became an outspoken pro-choice activist. For more information, see Maria Newman, "Daughter of Woman in Abortion Case Takes a Pro-Choice Stand," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 11, 1989.

support or resources for mothers who give birth to children that they cannot care for alone. She states:

I have been forced to live with the consequence of this false compassion for too long for me not to bring to the attention of the Court the fact that abortion is not in a woman's interest, and the fact that legalization of abortion began with manipulations and misrepresentations. Too many women who lost their children through abortion have told me of their emptiness, their sadness, the void in their lives, and how others forced them to have abortions and then blamed the abortion on the mother.⁴¹⁵

Here, the elision of post-abortion regret and post-plaintiff regret form the logical basis of Cano's argument. Trauma, whether it results from being the *Doe* plaintiff or receiving an abortion, is a clear and logical outcome of either action. As such, Cano justifies her view that abortion should be outlawed by claiming that a woman's right to choose is not in "a woman's interest," rather, it is a force for psychological harm.

Couched, as legal scholar Jeannie Suk notes, in paternalistic terms, Cano, the other women, and their lawyers beseech the court to take on the role of a benevolent parent: protecting women from choices that would ultimately harm them.⁴¹⁶ Additionally, Cano's call for paternal support hints at the religious right's broader campaign to restore the traditional (straight, white, and heterosexual) family to prominence. Nevertheless, this appeal to tradition comes with a veneer of progressivism, as Cano calls upon men to take upon more supportive roles in raising families.

Alarming, the justices ruled in favor of upholding the ban. Justice Anthony Kennedy cited the Cano brief in the majority opinion, arguing that partial-birth abortions could traumatize women to the point where they experience "severe depression and loss of esteem."⁴¹⁷ By framing the decision in this way, Justice Kennedy adopted the logic of Cano and the other women who

⁴¹⁵ Brief of Sandra Cano, 8.

⁴¹⁶ Suk, "The Trajectory of Trauma," 1251.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1195.

contributed to amicus brief. He perpetuated the infantilization of women and justified legal intervention in order to protect them from themselves, despite the fact that many of these abortions are elected to save the life of the mother in cases of severe health issues.⁴¹⁸

The record of McCorvey's life becomes sparse after the mid-2000s. Flurries of activity—her 2009 protests of Barack Obama at Notre Dame University and Sonia Sotomayor's Supreme Court confirmation hearing, 2012 TV spots to encourage Florida voters to vote against Obama in the presidential election—indicate that she remained committed to the pro-life cause, even if the intensity of her work was tempered by age and poor health as she suffered from a combination of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and heart disease.⁴¹⁹ A gossipy *Vanity Fair* profile by journalist Joshua Prager from February 2013 fills in some of the gaps in regard to her personal life. While she worked for *Priests for Life*, Connie Gonzales's presence was quietly tolerated. McCorvey would refer to her partner of over three decades as her “aunt,” “godmother,” or “cousin,” bringing Gonzales along with her on speaking gigs in the US and abroad.⁴²⁰

But the financial successes which buoyed her through the late 1990s were short-lived. In 2005, the two women were barely making ends meet. Gonzales had survived a stroke a year earlier, and the cost of her healthcare weighed on their limited finances. McCorvey sold their house to a Catholic ministry and entreated the public for assistance because she and Gonzales were struggling to afford food. In 2006, the two women split, not due to the pleas of pro-life

⁴¹⁸ For clarification about the term “partial-birth abortion,” see Julie Rovner, “‘Partial-Birth Abortion’: Separating Fact From Spin,” WNYC Radio, February 21, 2006, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2006/02/21/5168163/partial-birth-abortion-separating-fact-from-spin>.

⁴¹⁹ See Appendix figure 19; Paul Kane, “‘Jane Roe’ Arrested at Supreme Court Hearing,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2009; “Norma (Jane Roe),” *Virtue Media*, Sept. 17, 2012, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/49600976>; Robert D. McFadden, “Norma McCorvey, ‘Roe’ in *Roe v. Wade*, Is Dead at 69,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2017.

⁴²⁰ Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

leaders, but because McCorvey could (or would) no longer take care of the ailing Gonzales.⁴²¹

In the end, McCorvey disappeared into the role that she had crafted for herself in the pro-life movement. This ultimate transformation can be seen in the Christian film *Doonby* (2013).⁴²² For once, McCorvey did not appear as herself, as this movie was a work of fiction rather than a documentary. The feature, which billed itself as “‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ meets ‘The Twilight Zone’” tells the tale of a drifter, Sam Doonby, who wanders into the Texas town of Smithville, taking up work as a bartender and musician and accidentally sending the community into a tizzy (largely due to his undeniable yet untouchable sex appeal).⁴²³ He rejects the propositions of many female customers and coworkers, choosing instead to pursue a chaste relationship with dance instructor and daughter of the town gynecologist, Lisa Reaper. The mysterious Sam seems to bring both disaster and hope with him. Within weeks of his arrival, Lisa’s nephew nearly dies in a freak accident and her father is falsely accused of rape. Thankfully, Sam manages to save both of her relatives from death and disgrace.

Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that the enigmatic Sam survived a rough childhood. His mother, Lucy Mae, abandoned him when he was young to run away with a married lover despite the pleas of her pious neighbor, Nancy Thurber (Norma McCorvey). The film ends in the present, as, in a convoluted plot twist, Lisa wakes up from a nap to discover that Sam has disappeared and no one in Smithville has ever heard of him. As she frantically combs through Sam’s now-empty journal, we learn that Sam was not left behind by his mother; he was aborted. Even more galling, the procedure was performed by none other than Lisa’s father, Dr. Reaper.

⁴²¹ Prager, “The Accidental Activist.”

⁴²² See Appendix figure 20.

⁴²³ Doonby, “Doonby the Movie: Every Nobody is Somebody,” Facebook, Sept. 12, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/doonbythemovie/>.

Through her role in *Doonby*, McCorvey simultaneously realized her childhood dream of appearing in movies and distilled decades of experience spent performing post-plaintiff regret. In a series of both real and imagined flashbacks to the actual past and a parallel reality, Nancy tries in vain to dissuade Sam's mother, Lucy Mae, from aborting or abandoning him.⁴²⁴ Unlike Norma McCorvey, Nancy is clearly straight, an upright member of the town who remained dedicated to her family even after her husband left her. While Lucy Mae made the wrong choice, Nancy's admonitions to her stand in for the Word of God. Lucy Mae may have had blood on her hands, but Nancy, with her unheeded "words of life," was not to blame for this tragedy. If Lucy Mae had only listened, not only would her son have lived, Lisa's nephew would have survived his accident and Dr. Reaper would not have succumbed to scandal.

Following this last major public appearance, McCorvey faded from the public eye. Her health worsened dramatically so she moved to Katy, Texas to be closer to family, including her daughter, Melissa. While the fight over *Roe* raged on, she became an absent presence: no longer contested terrain, a specter in the abortion debate. As she was dying, pro-life activists flocked to her side, hoping to spiritually comfort her.

The thoroughness of McCorvey's transformation from pro-choice plaintiff to pro-life figure is exemplified by the recollections of Karen Garnett, the former director of the Catholic Pro-Life Committee, who regularly visited McCorvey's bedside. In a documentary on the life of Norma McCorvey, *A Cold Day in Hell* (2017), Garnett recalls McCorvey's final days. She was haunted by her post-plaintiff regret, which manifested as fears about missing children, often asking Garnett, "Where are all the babies?"

One day, her refrain changed as she began to hallucinate that infants had appeared before her in her hospital room, telling Garnett to "Look at all the babies." As Garnett remembered

⁴²⁴ McCorvey and Thomas, *Won by Love*, 35; McCorvey and Meisler, *I am Roe*, 48-49.

tearfully, “And then she progressed from, ‘I don't want to die,’ to ‘I’m ready. I’m ready, I want to go home.’”⁴²⁵ Shortly afterwards, she died. While death freed McCorvey from her past as “Jane Roe,” her legacy would prove to become fraught territory once more as after her death, her legacy was reappropriated by both sides of the abortion debate.

⁴²⁵ Terry, *A Cold Day in Hell*.

Epilogue | Norma Leah McCorvey: Meditations on an Ambiguous Legacy

I did not know who Norma McCorvey was until the day after she died. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was absentmindedly scrolling through the *New York Times* website when her obituary caught my eye: “Norma McCorvey, ‘Roe’ in Roe v. Wade, Is Dead at 69.” I clicked on it mostly out of embarrassment. I had not realized that “Jane Roe” was not the real name of the *Roe* plaintiff, though in retrospect, the pseudonym’s bland familiarity should have been a tip-off.⁴²⁶

By all accounts, I should have known who she was. If I had not encountered McCorvey as a graduate student studying women’s history, then I certainly could have learned about her when I was younger. As a teenager, I had been ardently pro-life: a bygone political persuasion that I chalked up to the influence of a more conservative church I had attended intermittently in high school.

Norma McCorvey’s real name was hardly the most surprising piece of information I would learn about her that day. I poured over every article I could find online, amazed by each new turn in the story: her conversions, lesbianism, multiple pregnancies, work as a carny, bartender, and drug-dealer. At the very least, it was a riveting story. But I was troubled by the shock value, the litany of sins detailed in every obituary, peppered with pitying language to suggest a touch of humanity. She seemed to be missing from the stranger-than-fiction record of her own existence.

Throughout her life, Norma McCorvey was misrepresented, simplified, manipulated, and erased. At times, these revisions and erasures were the work of those exerting their power over her, and at others, she was the one wielding the pen. It is hardly surprising that, in her death, she

⁴²⁶ Robert D. McFadden, “Norma McCorvey, ‘Roe’ in Roe v. Wade, Is Dead at 69,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2017.

been resurrected as a paradoxical symbol once more. As such, I have elected to write an epilogue rather than a conclusion. Despite her death, McCorvey's story is far from over. The very contradictions that made McCorvey an unruly political symbol in life have guaranteed her a continued relevance in the political debate over abortion. Her unwieldiness as a political figure in life has been transformed into a malleability in death, as she has since been appropriated as an icon for the pro-choice, pro-life, and queer rights movements.

When Norma McCorvey died of heart failure at the age of 69 on February 18, 2017, she maintained a pattern which had ruled the latter two thirds of her life: she set off a media frenzy. News outlets across the globe featured obituaries of the deceased public figure, the majority of which foregrounded her role in *Roe*. Most followed the usual tripartite arc: a description of her destitute, "Dickensian" childhood, followed by the remarkable confluence of circumstances that led to her becoming the *Roe* plaintiff and some mention of her turn to pro-life activism.⁴²⁷

Sorting through the contradictory images of McCorvey is clearly a challenge for the authors of these obituaries. Most foreground her poverty and feelings of being exploited by the pro-choice movement while downplaying her conversion. For example, *New York Times* reporter Robert D. McFadden mentioned this turn part way through his article, noting that "she also switched sides, from abortion rights advocate to anti-abortion campaigner," thus presenting her conversion as more of an afterthought than a significant shift. He used voices on both sides of the abortion debate to describe her, including Susan Cheever and Fr. Frank Pavone, in order to suggest that she was a victim regardless of which side she worked for.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁷ For a few examples, see McFadden, "Norma McCorvey, 'Roe' in *Roe v. Wade*," *New York Times*; Emily Langer, "Norma McCorvey, Jane Roe of *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion nationwide, dies at 69," *Washington Post*, Feb. 18, 2017; Liz Farmer, "Norma McCorvey, Jane Roe of *Roe vs. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, dies outside Houston," *Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 18, 2017; BBC News, "*Roe v. Wade*: Woman in US abortion legal test case dies," *British Broadcasting Company*, Feb. 18, 2017.

⁴²⁸ McFadden, "Norma McCorvey."

Emily Langer of *The Washington Post* presented a more conflicted, if less sympathetic, portrait of McCorvey. Langer called McCorvey an “enigma” and noted that she “peddled misinformation about herself.” She presented the two opinions of McCorvey that dominated public discourse, that she was either “a victim of abuse, financial hardship, drug and alcohol addiction, and personal frailty” or “a user who trolled for attention and cash,” without explicitly taking a stance on either.

This attempt at neutrality remained consistent to the end of the article, as Langer closed the piece by quoting a 1994 interview that McCorvey gave to the *New York Times*: “I don’t require that much in my life... I just never had the privilege to go into an abortion clinic, lay down and have an abortion. That’s the only thing I never had.” While the decision to end the article with McCorvey’s own self-assessment is admirable, this quote was hardly reflective of McCorvey’s thoughts on abortion for the two decades preceding her death.⁴²⁹

Understandably, prominent pro-life leaders were incensed by what they perceived as an erasure of McCorvey’s pro-life convictions. Leaders of the movement responded quickly by staking their claim to McCorvey’s legacy. Priests for Life (PFL) added an archive on McCorvey to their website, compiling her writings, media appearances, and articles on her work as a pro-life activist in one central location. Such a move was not unwarranted, as McCorvey retained close ties with the Catholic organization until her death, and Father Frank Pavone, the organization’s National Director, officiated at her funeral.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ Langer, “Norma McCorvey, Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade.”

⁴³⁰ “Remembering Norma McCorvey, The Former ‘Jane Roe’ of Roe v. Wade,” *Priests for Life*, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/Norma/>.

Both Pavone and Janet Morana, PFL’s Executive Director, released in-depth reflections on McCorvey’s legacy shortly after her death.⁴³¹ Days later, Morana penned an additional article entitled “The Vicarious Trauma of Jane Roe” with social worker and pro-life activist Kevin Burke, which was published online by the *National Catholic Register*. This think piece on McCorvey’s life, emotional suffering, and spiritual healing is infused with the psychologizing language central to the rhetoric of post-abortion and post-plaintiff regret.

The authors offered a fresh take by describing McCorvey’s post-plaintiff regret as “vicarious trauma,” the suffering experienced by those exposed to repeated “violence, injury, loss of life, and other tragedy.”⁴³² In McCorvey’s case, they argued that her vicarious trauma was the result of being the *Roe* plaintiff and working in abortion clinics. But the mournful tenor that would be expected mere days after her death was displaced by an almost-jubilant tone as the coauthors detailed her therapeutic journey from despair into hope through her work with pro-life organizations dedicated to helping women healing from post-abortion regret. They marveled, “As Norma watched the women move from fear, anger, and pain to peace and new life in the Lord, she began to see that there was hope for healing those wounded by abortion. This was a great consolation and helped ease the burden of guilt and anguish she carried in her heart and soul.”⁴³³ Conceptualizing McCorvey’s trauma as merely the prelude to greater spiritual triumph

⁴³¹ Frank Pavone, “Roe No More: Plaintiff in Supreme Court Abortion Decision Dies. Reflections from a Friend,” *Priests for Life*, March 24, 2017, accessed January 16, 2018, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/library/7307-roe-no-more-plaintiff-in-supreme-court-abortion-decision-dies-reflections-from-a-friend.>; Janet Morana, “A Remembrance of Norma McCorvey (1947-2017),” *National Catholic Register* (blog), Feb. 18, 2017.

⁴³² Janet Morana and Kevin Burke, “The Vicarious Trauma of Jane Roe,” *National Catholic Register* (blog), Feb. 22, 2017. Unlike post-abortion regret, vicarious trauma is a medically recognized phenomena that can be experienced by those whose work brings them into close contact with patients or persons suffering from psychological trauma. For an example, see Michaela A. Kadambi and Derek Truscott, “Vicarious Trauma Among Therapists Working with Sexual Violence, Cancer, and General Practice,” *Canadian Journal of Counselling* 38 no. 4 (2004), 260-276.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

was in keeping with the redemptive theology that underpinned McCorvey's role as the pro-life movement's perpetual penitent.⁴³⁴

But the publication of this article mere days after McCorvey's death hardly helped the pro-life movement escape the persistent accusation that they were using her as a political tool. The actions of pro-life pundits across the denominational aisle further exacerbated matters. Jim Bakker, the once-disgraced televangelist who was convicted on 24 counts of conspiracy and fraud in 1988, dedicated an episode of the *Jim Bakker Show* to the deceased plaintiff and activist, entitled "The Truth about Norma McCorvey." Over the course of the freewheeling hour-long episode, Bakker, his wife and co-host Lori, and other NCR public figures discussed McCorvey's conversion and subsequent work within the pro-life movement.⁴³⁵

While some background on McCorvey is provided, their unscripted conversation often diverged from her life, as her connections with other NCR figures become fodder for politicized tangents. Her relationship with Flip Benham became the jumping off point for a discussion of gay marriage as his sons, Jason and David Benham, had recently lost their contract for a show entitled *Flip it Forward* on HGTV due to their public denouncements of marriage equality. A photo depicting McCorvey meeting with evangelist Paula White was used to turn the conversation towards recently appointed President Donald Trump, as White played a key role in making Trump more palatable to evangelical audiences.⁴³⁶ In the miasma of the conversation, little new about McCorvey was revealed. Nevertheless, this freeform discussion of McCorvey in relation to "traditional marriage" and the controversial Trump presidency suggests a fluidity among NCR public figures. Forgotten were McCorvey's lesbian relationships and egregious

⁴³⁴ Morana and Burke, "The Vicarious Trauma of Jane Roe."

⁴³⁵ Richard N. Ostling, "Religion: Jim Bakker's Crumbling World," *Time Magazine*, Dec. 19, 1988; "The Truth About Norma McCorvey," in *The Jim Bakker Show*, PTL Television Network, March 7, 2017.

⁴³⁶ For further context on Paula White's connections with Donald Trump, see Julia Duin, "She led Trump to Christ: The rise of the televangelist who advises the White House," *Washington Post Magazine*, Nov. 14, 2017.

missteps. The conversation articulated McCorvey as one player in the interconnected web of the NCR, a figure as central as Evangelical celebrities, televangelists, and politicians.

McCorvey's former allies in Operation Rescue were not willing to be left out of the free-for-all. OR Founder Randall Terry released a new documentary on McCorvey, *A Cold Day in Hell*, within months of her death. The film swept the 2017 Christian Film Festival Awards.⁴³⁷ While the documentary was primarily composed of recycled footage from McCorvey's earlier media appearances and two other documentaries, *Reversing Roe* (1996) and *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire* (1998), Terry's narration and the extensive interviews with pro-life commentators provided a number of fresh insights into McCorvey's later years in the movement.⁴³⁸

Terry was unambiguous about the goal of the documentary, namely, to combat Joshua Prager's forthcoming book on *Roe v. Wade*, which he fears will cast "aspersions and doubts on Norma's conversion." At times, the film was blatantly emotionally manipulative. The filmmakers reveled in the impropriety of McCorvey's past, as well as the illicit sexual behavior of her mother and grandmother. Actual photos of McCorvey were interspersed with stock photos of abused women and girls in order to heighten the sense of her suffering as a young woman. Terry's melodramatic summary of scenes from her childhood and youth, which are mostly based on *I am Roe*, overshadowed McCorvey's own words on her early life.

Elsewhere, the low-budget film made an ardent effort to acknowledge McCorvey's honored but complicated role as a pro-life figure. The most remarkable moments in the film were the anecdotes of pro-life figures who worked with McCorvey during the latter third of her life. Janet Morana laughingly recalled that McCorvey nicknamed her "the woman of the East," and

⁴³⁷ Christian Film Festival, "Congratulations 'A Cold Day in Hell'," Facebook, Nov. 26, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1936888569896616&id=1641247486127394. The title of this film is a colloquialism which sarcastically refers to the time when an impossible event will occur. It suggests that McCorvey's conversion was nothing short of miraculous, as illustrated by the song Terry wrote that riffs on the idiom during the closing credits.

⁴³⁸ *A Cold Day in Hell*, directed by Randall Terry (2017; Victorious Lady Productions), Streaming Video.

demanded that she buy a proper cowgirl outfit, complete with a hat and boots, when she came to visit McCorvey in Texas.

Reverend Rob Schenck, an Evangelical minister who worked with McCorvey as early as 1996, remarked that McCorvey was “raw in her humanity, unpretentious. You didn't have to guess what she was thinking, because she would tell you in no uncertain terms. There was nothing oblique, nothing politically sensitive, nothing...” He illustrated this point with an anecdote about McCorvey complimenting him on how dapper he looked, which she followed up by adding, “You'd better be glad I'm not hunting men.” This embarrassing moment was, as Schenck recalled, a typical joke for McCorvey: “I remember feeling the capillaries in my face nearly exploding... she just loved humiliating me.” Furthermore, the joke suggested a certain non-normative sexuality on McCorvey's part. Its provocative implications were hardly in keeping with gendered mores for respectable Christian women.

McCorvey's cheeky sense of humor seemed to be well-known among her pro-life compatriots. Tama Chunn, director of the Foundation for Life, recalled that “She loved to be sensational; she loved to be shocking; she loved to be contrary.” Carol Everett, a pro-life activist who, like McCorvey, defected from the pro-choice movement, reminisced that, “We were speaking at an event in San Antonio, and she walked up and said, 'I don't have a bra on.’” As these small incidents illustrate, McCorvey's assimilation to the NCR platform may have been less seamless than she suggested in *Won by Love*. Her continued propensity for bralessness and provocative humor directly and delightfully contradicted the more buttoned-up woman she depicts herself as in her second memoir.

A brief, but nonetheless surprising part of the film further subverted the mythology that McCorvey constructed for herself following her conversion. This segment, which is entitled

“Used and Abused,” repeated the well-established assertions that she was exploited by the pro-choice movement. One activist remembered that McCorvey had confronted Sarah Weddington about how Weddington treated her during the *Roe* proceedings following a public debate in 2002, and that Weddington responded in turn “without a scintilla of compassion.”

Nevertheless, the interviewees did not see themselves as above reproach. Shortly after this, Carol Everett stated with some hesitation, “I’m not sure I want this anywhere, but she was used by this side too.” Two of the other activists featured also confessed their regrets about the pro-life movement’s politicization of McCorvey’s story. Such candor about McCorvey’s politicization by the pro-life movement was unprecedented. As these interviews were recorded after McCorvey’s death, there is certainly cause to question whether or not such self-awareness required a degree of hindsight on behalf of the pro-life movement.

Tui Curiel, a lawyer and activist who became a close friend of McCorvey, pondered at length about this particular quandary:

Norma was a dire pro-lifer but there were times she really felt used... Pro-lifers aren't perfect. So the people she was going to speak for weren't perfect, and none of us are... when that friendship wasn't there, even when the money wasn't there for a speaking fee to acknowledge the fact that she was giving of her time, and giving of her person— it's a horrendous feeling, to have to describe what the abortion industry is, and then the conversion. Norma gave of herself when she talked about her story.

The emotional labor that Curiel describes is one of the few counterarguments to the oft-trotted out party line that McCorvey was not exploited following her conversion.⁴³⁹ Tucked inside the Christian in-speak of Curiel’s observations is an incisive argument about one of the more controversial aspects of McCorvey’s pro-life work: namely, that she received payment for many

⁴³⁹ “Emotional labor” refers to the expectations placed on workers to display certain emotions. For example, customer service representatives in the US are usually expected to smile and convey cheerfulness in when serving customers. McCorvey, in contrast, was expected to publicly perform remorse when speaking as a pro-life activist. For more information, see Amy S. Wharton, “The Sociology of Emotional Labor,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009), 147-165.

of her speeches and public appearances. According to Curiel’s assessment, McCorvey’s expectation that she would be paid for her work was not fueled by greed or a lack of spiritual conviction, rather, it was a fitting honorarium given the challenge of her activist work. It is clear that Curiel’s comments were designed to contradict journalist Joshua Prager’s claims about McCorvey, as Prager has argued at length that McCorvey’s pro-life convictions were fueled by a desire to turn her “Jane Roe” identity into profit.

Another theme in Curiel’s reflection—that the presence or absence of friendship with other activists was integral to McCorvey’s feelings of whether or not she was being used—speaks to broader social implications that informed McCorvey’s participation in the pro-life movement. This “personal element” was not merely friendship with other Christians, or a feeling of acceptance. It was survival. At the beginning of the film, Terry remarked that McCorvey lived with him and his family for a month during a rough stretch in her life. Carol Everett stated that McCorvey “was loved and cared for... I don't know anyone who has a network of people who just take them in and care for them... to have a whole network, across the country, that was an unusual situation, but Norma was an unusual person.” In addition to providing McCorvey with love and community, this network was central in keeping her alive.

These observations resonate with Joan C. Williams’s analysis of the role of church membership in her book *White Working Class*. Williams states that, “For many in the working class, churches provide the kind of mental exercise, stability, hopefulness, future orientation, impulse control and social safety net many in the professional elite get from their families, their career potential, their therapists, and their bank account.”⁴⁴⁰ As the voices in this documentary suggest, as well as those who emerged to surround and honor McCorvey around the time of her

⁴⁴⁰ Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), locations 314-316, Kindle.

death, the pro-life movement provided McCorvey with a “social safety net” as well as the resources she needed to live.

Despite the support that the pro-life community provided, other pro-life leaders continue to feast off of McCorvey’s story. According to pro-life news outlets, a fictional McCorvey is slated to be resurrected in a forthcoming political thriller about *Roe v. Wade*. This revisionist “historical drama” will follow the conniving Lawrence Lader, a protégé of Margaret Sanger and groundbreaking pro-choice activist, in his nefarious plot to legalize abortion. As *Live Action News* announced in January of 2018, “In the resulting script for ‘Roe v. Wade,’ created with a team of professional screenwriters, Notre Dame law professor Charles Rice is the protagonist who discovers Lawrence Lader’s conspiracy to legalize abortion, from craftily co-opting Betty Friedan’s feminist movement to pawning naïve young McCorvey.” Considering that there is no convincing historical evidence connecting Lader to McCorvey’s involvement in *Roe*, it is unlikely that this ambitious film will accurately depict either the history or *Roe* or the life of its plaintiff.⁴⁴¹

To cast the full burden of blame on the pro-life movement would obscure the surprising ways in which other social movements have continued to connect McCorvey’s legacy to their political messaging. One of the more shocking claims on McCorvey’s legacy came not from the pro-choice movement, but rather from the LGBT rights movement. *Advocate*, an online news outlet targeted at the queer community, published an article on McCorvey entitled “Lesbian Plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade* Dead at 69” the day after her death. The brief piece is a stark example of how McCorvey’s self-contradictory behavior can and has enabled the public to perpetuate selective memories of her life.

⁴⁴¹ Amanda Read, “New *Roe v. Wade* thriller drama set to tell story of abortion in U.S.,” *Live Action News*, Jan. 23, 2018.

The article praised McCorvey for her public identification with the LGBT movement, remarking that, “By the 1980s, McCorvey was open about her identity and her sexuality; she had a 35-year relationship with a woman named Connie Gonzalez [sic]. While McCorvey identified as a lesbian in one of her memoirs, she had numerous relationships with both men and women.” This assertion was followed by a reality check, noting that “McCorvey would eventually meet anti-abortion advocates and be drawn to their side,” yet there was no mention of her renunciation of her lesbian identity, nor the painful end to her relationship with Gonzales. Instead, the author stated that “McCorvey didn’t necessarily fit amongst her fellow anti-abortion foes, who also judged homosexuality as inherently wrong.” While there is some truth to this assessment, it oversimplifies McCorvey’s role in the pro-life movement and the varied reactions she received due to her lesbianism, particularly when she was still partnered with Connie Gonzales.⁴⁴²

On the occasion of McCorvey’s death, most of her former allies in the pro-choice movement elected to remain silent. A notable exception to this pattern was *Roe* lawyer Sarah Weddington. In an interview in *The Observer*, she was asked about McCorvey’s recent death. Her response implied that the tension between the two had not been absolved even in death. As she remarked, “Well, I was sad. I appreciate that she was once concerned with overturning the law on abortion. But [after becoming] Jane Roe, she ended up going on all these pro-choice tours. I learned to be very careful about believing what she said.” Her emphasis on McCorvey’s unreliability hearkened back to the elitist language that was used to dismiss McCorvey when she was a pro-choice figure: hardly a sentimental take on the life of legalized abortion’s eponymous plaintiff.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴² Neal Broverman, “Lesbian Plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade* Dead at 69,” *Advocate*, Feb. 18, 2017, <https://www.advocate.com/women/2017/2/18/lesbian-plaintiff-roe-v-wade-dead-69>.

⁴⁴³ Rachel Cooke, “Sarah Weddington, *Roe v Wade* attorney, on Trump’s threat to abortion rights,” *The Observer* (London), March 12, 2017.

A more intricate analysis came from a pro-choice leader who, like McCorvey, has faced systemic exclusion from mainstream, whitewashed feminist discourse: Loretta Ross, the co-founder of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective. In her article on *Bitch Media*'s website, Ross commemorates McCorvey while still upholding her own pro-choice convictions. She writes:

She spoke of her suicidal depression, and courageously revealed her private warts to a judgmental public. She was not a mythical feminist icon, or a middle-class “respectable” conservative who could be showcased in the media to shame other women. She was never anyone’s poster child. Apocalyptic movements on the left and the right prefer archetypal figures that elicit public sympathy and middle-class empathy.

Poor Norma, I mourned her while she was alive.⁴⁴⁴

This elegant testimony to a divisive figure is a standout among the multitudes of totalizing assessments of McCorvey. Ross even celebrates McCorvey’s conversion, remarking that “Defections from our feminist movement should not be dismissed as embarrassing failures, but rather seen as an affirmation of the rights of women to change their minds and make different decisions at various stages of their lives.” Nevertheless, even Ross occasionally falls prey to the tendency to conceptualize McCorvey as predominantly a victim.

Despite her earlier assertion that defections should be affirmed, she likens McCorvey’s relationship with pro-life leaders to “battered-woman syndrome, or maybe Stockholm Syndrome.” Ross’s sympathy is inseparable from her understanding of McCorvey as a vulnerable pawn. She states, “Any woman in her situation would have suffered from the impacts of her compounded traumas, and those who judge her harshly may be insensitive to her realities.” By not recognizing that McCorvey derived immense political power from her pro-life activism, Ross diminishes her capacity to choose. The blame for this assessment cannot

⁴⁴⁴ Loretta Ross, “Mourning Norma McCorvey: The Story of Jane Roe is a Lifelong Struggle to Heal from Hardship and Abuse,” *Bitch Media*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/mourning-norma-mccorvey/story-jane-roe-lifelong-struggle-heal-hardship-and-abuse>.

exclusively be assigned to Ross, as characterizations of McCorvey as a victim abound.

Ultimately, Ross outpaced many of her feminist contemporaries by considering McCorvey worthy of mourning in the first place.⁴⁴⁵

The shortcomings of Ross's article pale in comparison with the continued tendency of reproductive rights organizations to organize around *Roe* while forgetting the woman behind the pseudonym. In the aftermath of Trump's election, Feminist Majority launched their Millions4Roe campaign, which was primarily targeted at blocking the appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court.⁴⁴⁶ Ironically, the campaign touting McCorvey's more famous pseudonym was headed by her former adversary, Feminist Majority president Eleanor Smeal.

While this campaign was not the first time that the Feminist Majority had named a campaign after *Roe*, as their 2007 NeverGoBack and Save Roe campaigns were designed to draw public attention to the impending *Gonzales v. Carhart* trial, the timing of this campaign—a mere month after McCorvey's death—was particularly insensitive. Later in 2017, likely in the aftermath of Senate Judiciary Committee's appointment of Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, the campaign was rebranded to “Feminists Fight Back” and the abortion-specific logo was removed from the website. It appears that around this time, “Feminists Fight Back” became a catch-all website for two specific campaigns, “Save Healthcare” and “Save Roe.”⁴⁴⁷

There is a painful irony embedded in the “Save Roe” slogan. Namely, that in one regard, “Roe” herself was saved: after all, being “saved” is a common synonym within Evangelical Christian discourse for conversion. This slogan, while succinct and easy to plaster onto a sign at

⁴⁴⁵ Ross, “Mourning Norma McCorvey.”

⁴⁴⁶ “Feminist Majority Launches Grassroots Movement to Save Roe,” *Feminist Majority*, March 20, 2017, <http://feministmajority.org/feminist-majority-launches-grassroots-movement-to-save-roe/>. This page has since been deleted, but can be accessed at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170321073035/http://feministmajority.org/feminist-majority-launches-grassroots-movement-to-save-roe/>.

⁴⁴⁷ “Feminists Fight Back, *Feminist Majority Foundation*, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://feministsfightback.org/>.

a march, conveys a political message with a troubling backstory. Yet while *Roe* continues to be read as shorthand for legalized abortion, and legalized abortion remains under attack, it seems unlikely that the motto will fade from use.

The name of Norma McCorvey has, to a certain extent, fared no better. Around *Roe*'s 45th anniversary on January 23, 2018, op-eds, blog posts, and letters to editors from pro-life activists appeared across the United States and abroad. In their quest to sway public opinion on abortion, many invoked Norma McCorvey. The repetitive references to McCorvey's conversion and change of heart in these articles is telling. In the same way that *Roe* has become synonymous with legalized abortion, McCorvey is running the risk of being transformed into shorthand for its antithesis: a reconsideration of abortion policy in the U.S.⁴⁴⁸

Is there room for the real McCorvey in this slew of slogans and op-eds? In the past year of researching her, I have been troubled by this question. I fear that the deceased McCorvey will live parallel symbolic lives: "Jane Roe," triumphant feminist icon, and Norma McCorvey, the embodiment of the pro-life movement's riff on the conversion narrative. As the abortion debate rages on, each symbol continues to hold considerable affective and political weight. What would McCorvey herself have wanted? It is difficult to know; sources grew thin as she aged out of the spotlight. *A Cold Day in Hell* makes a compelling case that she was an authentic Christian dedicated to the pro-life movement. But it is hard to imagine that a woman who felt she was repackaged and exploited by the pro-choice movement would wish to be remembered as only a symbol.

⁴⁴⁸ A few of the many articles and op-eds include Brian Blackwell, "ABRAHAM: Abortion is a national tragedy that we must end," *The Message*, Jan. 19, 2018, <http://baptistmessage.com/abortion-national-tragedy-must-end/>; Harold Prentiss, "Inexcusable Barbarism," *The Standard-Journal*, Milton, PA, Feb. 1, 2018; "Jane Roe of *Roe v. Wade* Never Had An Abortion, Her Daughter is 48," *Canada Free Press*, Jan. 16, 2018.

While complex representations of McCorvey remain rare, the search for new frameworks to make sense of complicated stories in the abortion debate is a recurring theme in pockets of feminist scholarship.⁴⁴⁹ A trailblazer in this regard was scholar and abortion clinic worker Jeannie Ludlow. In her insightful 2008 essay, “The Things we Cannot Say” she identifies a three-tiered hierarchy of pro-choice abortion narratives. The first tier she deems “politically necessary” narratives: ones that are used as an ironclad defense against pro-life rhetoric, such as abortions in cases of rape or incest.

Not all stories, Ludlow states, are welcome in pro-choice discourse. The middle tier consists of “politically acceptable” stories: tales of abortions obtained because of somewhat preventable issues, such as contraceptive failure, which are more morally ambiguous but not entirely morally reprehensible. The third and final category is merely called “the things we cannot say”: stories which she fears telling as they might provide fodder for the anti-abortion movement.⁴⁵⁰ “The things we cannot say,” which Ludlow admits are the most common in her experience as an abortion provider, do not fit within the standards of acceptable pro-choice discourse: tales of post-abortion regret, multiple abortions, refusal to use contraceptives, and other discomfoting stories. Nevertheless, Ludlow argues that the act of witnessing these stories can be a political act, as allowing women to speak honestly about their experiences counteracts the tendency to “traumatize” abortion narratives.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ In addition to Jeannie Ludlow’s “The Things we Cannot Say” (2008) which will be discussed below, a few other examples include Carly Thomsen, “From Refusing Stigmatization toward Celebration: New Directions for Reproductive Justice Activism,” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 149-58; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719304>; Jody Lynee Madeira, “Aborted Emotions: Regret, Relationality, and Regulation,” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 21, no. 1 (2014): 1-66; Lisa A. Martin, Jane A. Hassinger, Michelle Debbink, and Lisa H. Harris, “Dangertalk: Voices of Abortion Providers,” *Social Science & Medicine* 184, no. 1 (2017): 75-83.

⁴⁵⁰ Jeannie Ludlow, “The Things We Cannot Say: Witnessing the Trauma-tization of Abortion in the United States,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 29-31.

⁴⁵¹ Ludlow, “The Things We Cannot Say.” 40.

Applying this framework to McCorvey's story is an interpretive stretch as McCorvey never had an abortion. Furthermore, McCorvey's quest for an abortion predated the pro-choice rhetoric Ludlow describes, and McCorvey's actions were a prerequisite for the creation of such a body of rhetoric in the first place. Yet Ludlow's invitation to tell all abortion stories, regardless of how shameful or politically precarious they are, is a valuable starting point for making sense of McCorvey's story.⁴⁵²

Saying "the things we cannot say" about McCorvey makes room for her inconsistencies, idiosyncrasies, and foibles. This approach allows McCorvey to be both "Jane Roe" and the face of the pro-life movement, a lesbian and a "former homosexual," a negligent partner, loving friend, and abused child. No fragment of her life story is truer than any other. She perfectly encapsulated Walt Whitman's oft-repeated refrain, "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"⁴⁵³ Contradicting herself may have been one of McCorvey's greatest talents and simultaneously, her most valuable contributions to the abortion debate.

In McCorvey's contradictions, there is a necessary and productive discomfort. After all, her life story never was just a story about abortion, much like the public debate on abortion itself. McCorvey's life and actions raise question about class, sexuality, political symbolism, reproductive rights, mainstream feminism, and religion, to name a few. Like an archetypal joker, she thwarted binaries, slipping between sides and confounding the black-and-white logic at the heart of the abortion debate. It is my hope that this thesis will be one many expressions of "the

⁴⁵² A promising example of this sort of representation comes from playwright Lisa Loomer, whose play *Roe* premiered in 2016 and has since been performed at four theaters in the US. Loomer's script features actors portraying McCorvey, Sarah Weddington, Flip Benham, and Supreme Court justices. It has been called "a parable of an exclusionary women's movement," and has been lauded for its representation of the roles that "race, class, sexuality, and the other intersecting forms of power" play in the abortion debate. See Nora Caplan-Bricker, "A Play About *Roe v. Wade* That Is a Parable of an Exclusionary Women's Movement," *The New Yorker*, Jan. 26, 2017.

⁴⁵³ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Bantam Classic, 1855; reprint, 1997), 39.

things we cannot say,” a building block in a more humanizing understanding of not only Norma McCorvey, but the untold numbers of accounts that form the story of reproductive justice in the United States.

Throughout my research, my hunger to see the human being behind the rhetoric has not waned. At times, I feel I have caught privileged glimpses of Norma Leah McCorvey. These slips of her mask have stuck with me: a scene of her dancing as a jukebox blares out a tune at a Waffle House; her mid-1990s observation that “I don’t imagine there’s too many people in America-land who like me right now”; her increasingly sassy rebuttals on BBC’s *HARDtalk* in 2004.⁴⁵⁴ Or her online funeral guest book, which is comprised of reminiscences from friends who knew her before she was “Jane Roe” as well as allies on both sides of the abortion debate. The result is collage of memories:

“She put her life on the line to give women the right to make their own decision on abortion.”

“Pixie was a hard-working young woman. She gave [me] a pregnant dog and I gave it back. I could barely feed myself. She gave me the dog because I was having a fit to own one. She was the life of our work group... in the 60’s...”

“She was amazing and will be missed dearly, even by people who never knew her.”

“On a bitterly cold January day, in Washington, DC, you took the time to speak to a young Black woman. You had just finished your book “Won by Love” and I told you that I was going to buy it and read it. I did. Your kindness to me, your humbleness touched me. I have and shall never forget the day I met you.”

“Be at peace dear Norma you carried such a load.”⁴⁵⁵

This patchwork medley of anecdotes and sentiments is a balm atop McCorvey’s misrepresentations. Time is collapsed, allowing her many sides to exist simultaneously. Her

⁴⁵⁴ The “America-land” comment appeared in *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*. McCorvey was interviewed by the filmmakers numerous times between 1994-1997. Based on what she said, it is likely that this particular interview was conducted after her 1995 conversion. Ilene and Meaghan O’Hara, *Roe v. Roe: Baptism by Fire*, performed by Norma McCorvey and Connie Gonzales, New York: Cinemax Reel Life, 1998.

⁴⁵⁵ “Norma Leah McCorvey,” *Legacy.com*, accessed January 16, 2018, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/norma-mccorvey-obituary?pid=1000000184229667&view=guestbook>.

dedication to those around her, whether they were friends from her 20s or a stranger she met for a fleeting moment, have equal space and weight. Hints of untold stories—reaching out to a young black pro-life woman or bequeathing a pregnant dog to a friend— suggest that there are numerous aspects of McCorvey’s life which have yet to be calcified into propaganda or mythology. Taken together, they make the anonymous “Jane Roe” specific, humanize a woman who was caricatured by the press, and present her as a multifaceted person rather than a political tool. The memories suggest that, in death, there may be hope of breathing life back into her oversimplified representations, or better yet, making room for McCorvey herself to speak.

Appendix: Illustrations

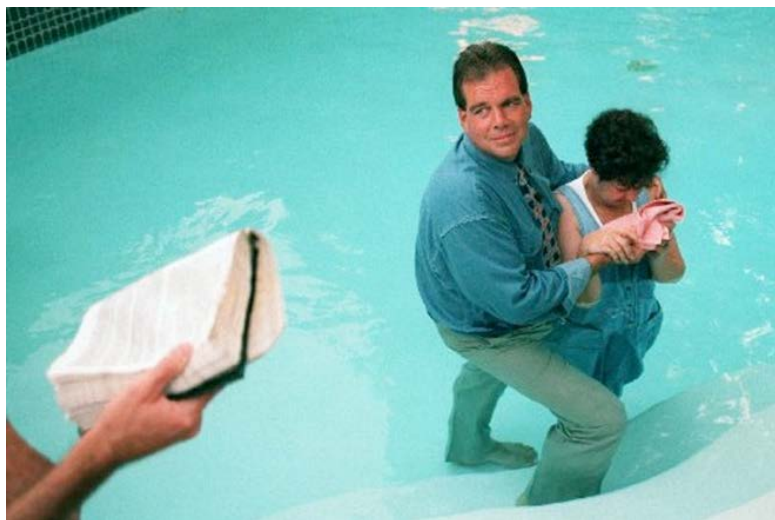


Figure 1 (left): Shortly Norma McCorvey's baptism.
Louis DeLuca, *Dallas Morning News*, Aug. 8, 1995.



Figure 2 (right): Moments after the completed baptism.
Flip Benham (personal photograph).



Figure 3 (left): Sarah Weddington in 1970, originally published in *The Cut*, *NY Magazine*.



Figure 4 (right): Linda Coffee at work. *Bettmann/ Getty Images*, Feb. 1972.

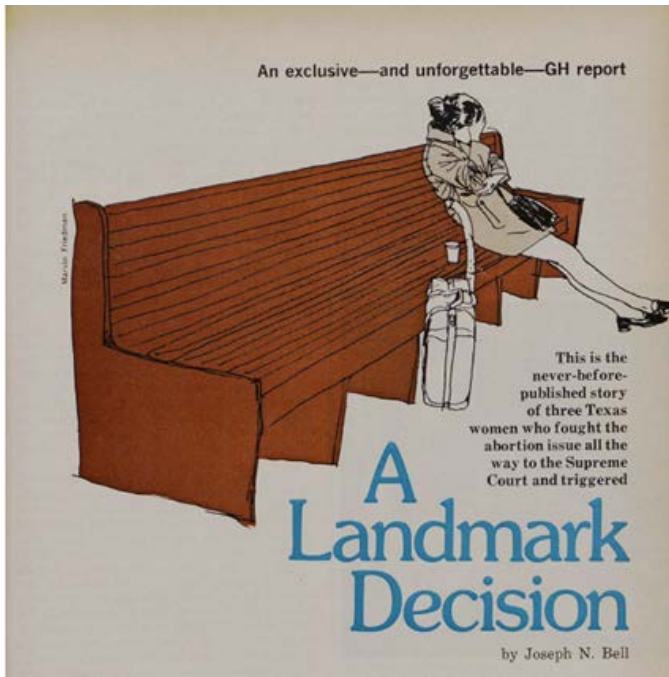


Figure 5: Illustration of “Betty Mae” (Norma McCorvey) from *Good Housekeeping*, June 1973.

Figure 6: Early press photo of Norma McCorvey.
Bill Janscha, *Associated Press*, 1982.





Figure 7: Norma McCorvey and Gloria Allred (right) at the Supreme Court hearing for *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*. J. Scott White, *Associated Press*, April 26, 1989.

Figure 8: Randall Terry at a protest. Lindsay Bryce, *Getty Images*, August 18, 1992.





Figure 9 (left): Norma McCorvey and Holly Hunter on the *Roe v. Wade* movie set.
Photo from *Won by Love*, 1997.

Figure 10 (right): Amy Madigan and Holly Hunter as Sarah Weddington and Ellen Russell in a promotional photo for *Roe v. Wade*, National Broadcasting Company, 1989.



Figure 11: Norma McCorvey in front of A Choice for Women, wearing a novelty pro-choice TV shirt with the slogan “The Incredible Shrinking Woman’s Right to Choose.”
Ron Helfin, *Associated Press*, 1995.

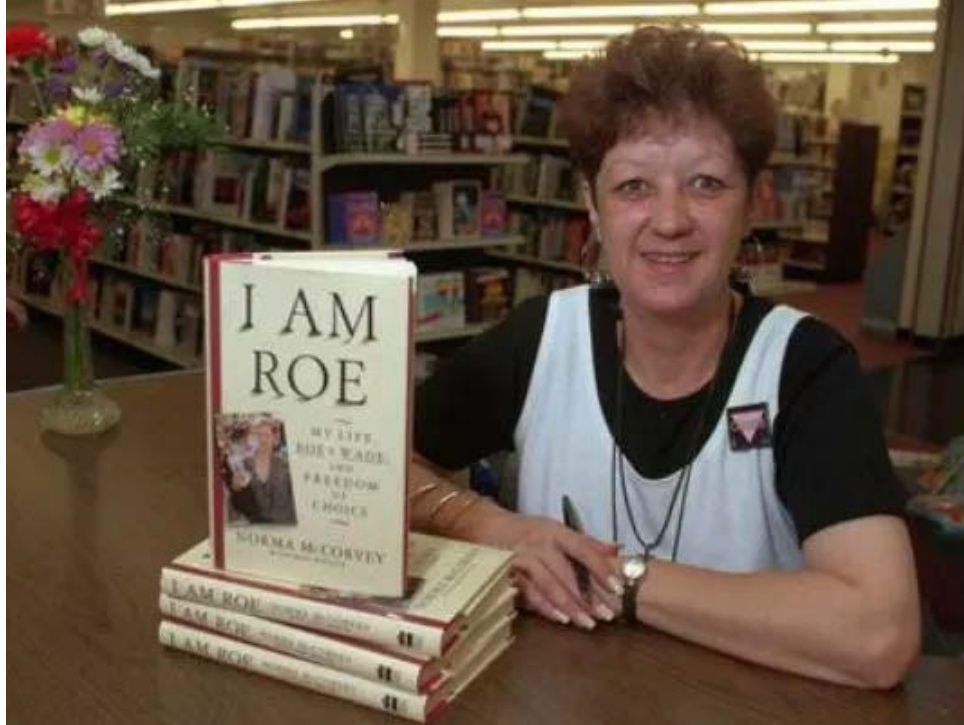


Figure 12: Norma McCorvey at a 1994 book signing for *I am Roe*.
Ron Helfin, *Associated Press*, June 23, 1994.



Figure 13: Norma McCorvey as photographed by Annie Liebovitz, *Women* (1999), 138-139.



Figure 14: Flip Benham and Norma McCorvey at an Operation Rescue protest in San Diego.
Ruth Fremson, *Associated Press*, 1996.



Figure 15: Norma McCorvey sitting between Rev. Robert Schenck (left) and Rev. Flip Benham (right) at pro-life service on the 23rd anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*.
Cameron Craig, *Associated Press*, Jan. 21, 1996.



Figure 16: Image of McCorvey's Confirmation into the Roman Catholic Church, Fr. Frank Pavone (left), *Priests for Life*, August 19, 1998



Figure 17: Norma McCorvey in Philadelphia after filing an ultimately unsuccessful Rule 60 motion to overturn *Roe*. Harold Cassidy, *The Witherspoon Institute Public Discourse*, date unknown.



Figure 18: Sandra Cano (left) and Norma McCorvey (right) testify in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Doug Mills. *New York Times*, June 23, 2005.



Figure 19: McCorvey at a protest against the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Alexandra Garcia, *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2009.



Figure 20: Still of Norma McCorvey as Nancy Thurber from *Doonby*, 2012.

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