

# DESTIGMATIZING ABORTION IN CANADA

## INTRODUCTION

In 1970, the Caravaners drew attention to the cruel and unjust nature of Canada's criminal abortion law by performing acts of guerrilla theatre on their cross-country trek. Three women would put on white coats and play the role of TAC physicians, while others begged them in vain for legally-sanctioned abortions. As the Caravan stopped in cities and towns from Vancouver to Ottawa, they also bolstered public support for legal reform by sharing personal abortion stories. This tactic emerged spontaneously, as they encountered women—some strangers, some not—who disclosed their experiences of accessing abortion, which were sometimes harrowing in days of the early '70s and decades previous, when abortion was illegal. Moved by the intimacy, power and sheer number of these stories, some Caravaners shared their own abortion experiences - with each other and publicly. They did so because what they came to learn along their trek was that a "cover-the-legs Victorian attitude" existed around abortion in Canada - as Karin Wells shows in her recently-published book on the campaign. Abortion in the 1970s was too shameful and stigmatized for most people to talk about, let alone lobby around—as the Caravaners did—for social change.

*[My aunt] told me she wasn't supporting the Caravan but I was welcome to stay [at her place], and then she told me—and she had two kids, my cousins—then she told me that she'd had two abortions. And I remember being absolutely staggered. First that she'd tell me at all and then that she was opposed to us wanting to have it for everybody. I was gobsmacked ... These kinds of stories would have never come out otherwise. People all across the country talked about these intimate personal experiences that they may not have told anyone about. With my aunt, I'm not even sure if my uncle knew.*

**CATHY WALKER,  
ORIGINAL CARAVANER**

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The writing that follows is about one woman's abortion experience - my co-editor's and friend's. Her story is intimate and powerful and informal, and brave of her to share. I am inspired by everyday activism of this sort; by just how many people have publicly disclosed their experiences, and surely will continue to. Telling abortion stories has been a longstanding tactic in Canada's pro-choice movement, which today's generation is taking up with great zeal and technical savvy - as Robyn's story evidences. Personal disclosure of this nature bridges the private and public spheres; it is a clear manifestation of the second-wave mantra "the personal is political" (for which we are indebted to our feminist foremothers); and it is gutsy and radical and full of love.

Destigmatizing abortion through public storytelling was urgent in the days of the 1970 Caravan, when the procedure was illegal in Canada. It remains urgent today, more than 30 years following its decriminalization. The tactic is urgent and necessary because abortion stigma is real, and because it fomented in all sorts of nefarious ways - internally, interpersonally, and institutionally. In an early and important article about its damaging effects, Kumar et al. (1996) define abortion stigma as "a negative attribute ascribed to those who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to the ideals of womanhood: female sexuality solely for procreation, the inevitability of motherhood, and instinctual nurturance of the vulnerable". This definition is comprehensive, but what can be added is that abortion stigma is also internalized by providers, as well as those who offer emotional and practical support to those who end unwanted pregnancies.

In an impactful conversation I had with a feminist organizer a few years ago, she posed a question to me - rhetorically, thankfully. She asked: "How do you strategically inoculate against the anti-choice? How do you destigmatize a legally offered service? It's a social and cultural question." My friend's writing that follows—emblematic of other creative means that feminists before her have used to share their personal abortion stories and inoculate against abortion stigma—is one clear and very moving answer.

*All of us had something inside of us that made us want to do this. It was the army of the willing and we were in it together.*

**MARCY COHEN,  
ORIGINAL CARAVANER**

# REFLECTIONS ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY: FROM ROBYN SCHWARZ, ONE OF MANY SISTERS ON THE 2020 ABORTION CARAVAN

When I was twenty-two, I had an abortion. This is my story.

I am from a small town called Kelowna in British Columbia. Most people from outside BC think of it as full of mountains and environmental activists. I think of BC that way too, but for me it also contains a toxic community I will never call home again because of my abortion experience. Kelowna, for me, symbolizes everything that I believe is wrong with how we treat fellow community members. It is home to some of Canada's most aggressive anti-abortion fanatics. Growing up, I thought it was normal to see people on the sidewalk next to the hospital where I was born holding gruesome signs of fetal remains and telling women that they would go to hell for choosing abortion. Whenever I go back to Kelowna to visit my family, I pass by this hospital and confront this reality. My understanding of my former community is thus one of exclusion, stigma and shame.

My abortion happened in Scotland - not Kelowna - when I was studying abroad at the University of Glasgow. When I found out I was pregnant, I felt so much shame. I had done everything humanly possible to avoid pregnancy. Hormones make me extremely sick, and after realizing that no pill would work, I was referred to an OB/GYN and we settled on a copper IUD. In Glasgow, the doctors and nurses worried that I had an ectopic pregnancy because of my IUD. But I also heard repeatedly how they had never heard of someone becoming pregnant over a year after having an IUD inserted. Initially, I was terrified - more about what would happen to me medically; much less about what I wanted for my future.

In Glasgow, a doctor kept me overnight at a hospital that I had never been to in my life, but once an ultrasound confirmed the pregnancy was not ectopic, I was on my own again. During my hospital stay, I called my parents - even though it was early morning Pacific Time. I was so worried, overwhelmed, and afraid. I did not know what they would say, but I wanted their help more than I needed their approval. It felt scarier to be alone, a 16-hour flight away from any familiar medical care, navigating this situation by myself. Given what I had seen as a child in Kelowna, I had no idea what they might say. My mom was supportive and told me I would get through this. I sobbed harder than I had in years, trying to explain the events of the day when I found out I was pregnant - having not fully come to terms with them myself. Neither of my parents pushed me to make a particular choice. I was thankful for that, but I was still overwhelmed and afraid. 'How could this happen to me?', I wondered. 'How could my body betray me this way?'

Almost a month passed between my positive pregnancy test and my surgical abortion, and every interaction I had with the Scottish National Health Service subtly confirmed my fears and reinforced anti-abortion narratives: that this was a mistake and I was now one of "those women". At the intake appointment for my abortion, the nurse asked what I planned to do for birth control going forward. I explained my terrible luck with contraceptive options in recent years, and that I would stick to condoms - for now. That was not good enough for her and she convinced me that I needed another copper IUD. That I wasn't responsible, and that since I was going to be put under anyway, I wouldn't feel a thing.

As I sat in the waiting room on the day of my abortion, I separated myself in my head from a younger woman who sat across from me, there for the same reason. I rationalized that I had done everything right—unlike her—and told myself I had nothing to feel bad about. I now recognize how problematic this logic was and how abortion stigma reinforces the idea that there are "good" and "bad" abortions. This is a myth the patriarchy tells us. Yet everyone who makes this choice is doing what is right for them. Everyone is being responsible. Only opponents try to take this truth away from us. The relief I felt after waking up from the general anesthesia gave me confidence and offered a glimpse of that truth. A nurse brought me something to eat and I felt blood between my legs. I was wearing a pad, which I hate, but I was okay.

When I returned to Kelowna 3 months later, I confided in an old friend from high school that I'd had an abortion. Telling him felt like a big deal to me, given the explicit anti-abortion values in our community. This friend had been there for me before, through bad break-ups and university admissions, but when I told him what happened, to my horror, he asked why I did not want to be a parent. He was eager to start a family of his own and did not understand why I wouldn't want a baby. He looked at me with sadness in his eyes. When I told my then boyfriend how my friend had responded, he scolded me with that same sadness. He said, "This is why we do not tell people. I don't know why you would do that."

These responses showed me that I couldn't trust anyone with my truth, and so, I didn't share what happened to me while I was in Scotland with anyone for many years. It was not until I had left Kelowna and moved to London, Ontario that I found meaning for and relief from the shame that had been projected upon me. It came from a space that has always provided me comfort: my work.

I was pursuing a PhD in Canadian history at Western at the time, and I came across an [an article by Angus McLaren](#) about the rise of the Social Gospel movement. McLaren's article talks about some really interesting early forms of birth control and it also outlines how male doctors helped stigmatize abortion in early twentieth century Canada. Pregnant people, I learned, had not always viewed having an abortion as a "problem" or something to feel bad about. A hundred years ago, we viewed it as a normal part of reproductive health and helped each other access the information needed to take care

of ourselves and our families. This truth was something I had always known deep down inside myself, but suddenly it resonated with me so profoundly. It forced me to reflect on the ways in which I had internalized abortion stigma - within myself in the years since I had my abortion; and, most importantly, the day I separated myself from the other young woman in that hospital waiting room in Glasgow. I realized in that moment that I was exactly like her, exactly like every single person who has had an abortion. Like them, I made the right choice for me.

*For me it was a time of trying to figure out what I was going to do in this world that would make a difference.*

**DAWN CARRELL (HEMINGWAY),  
ORIGINAL CARAVANER**

It has been almost ten years since I had my abortion. I remember that day so clearly because it was two days after my birthday. As I write this, it is now September 2020. We released the first piece of this project to commemorate the legacy of the 1970 Abortion Caravan in May. That feels like a hundred lifetimes ago but also like it was yesterday. This year has been unlike any I could have ever imagined, but I have much to be thankful for. I have made some amazing new friends. I am thankful to Jaime for going on this writing journey with me - for the friendship that formed through the countless hours we spent working together on this project. I am thankful to the original Caravaners - especially Dawn Hemingway. As I reflect on her words in the preface, which opened this project months ago, I see the many ways our feminist lives parallel one another. Across time and space, Dawn and I have a lot in common. We share the bonds of sisterhood. We've both taken many journeys across Canada from BC to Ontario over the years. And, like Dawn's experience in 1970, wire cutters also were brought out for the 2020 Abortion Caravan. Jaime and I have working alongside [Fiona Apple's Fetch the Bolt Cutters](#) since April.

It feels fitting to me, then, that I began writing this last piece of our 2020 Abortion Caravan in July, while in self-isolation at Big White so I could spend my dad's 60th birthday in person with him in Kelowna. Going back there during COVID-19 was surreal, in part because the [community became a viral hotspot](#). It was while I was alone in the mountains with my sweet dog for 14 days that I began to consider publishing my abortion story. And you are reading it today, on International Safe Abortion Day, or some time thereafter. If it is after, please tell me the world is a better and safer place - for me and for everyone who has ever had an abortion; or anyone who is deciding whether to, or will soon.

**JOIN US: [www.actioncanadashr.org/campaigns/abortion-caravan-celebrating-50-years](http://www.actioncanadashr.org/campaigns/abortion-caravan-celebrating-50-years)**

I believe the universe pushes us to be our best selves when we least expect it. Despite committing myself to reproductive justice work in southwestern Ontario for the last several years, I have never told my abortion story publicly. I was worried about being discredited. As a woman who started her career wanting to enter the Canadian historical profession, I had learned to "lean-in" to a discipline that continues to be steeped in patriarchy. I was not allowed to be emotional. I had to be objective, measured, and strong if I wanted to be taken seriously. I performed that role so well for years. It was fucking exhausting. However, it's 2020 and I'm done making decisions out of fear. We are living through a global pandemic, and climate change is here. My feminism tells me that we must rebuild this world through love. That love is the only way forward. One way to love is to share our experiences with one another.

The personal is still political. My activism was and still is driven by a desire to build a world where no one feels shamed for their choices. It is through this lens I share my story with you here, and it is the hope of our feminist collective that this piece - the final in our virtual trek in honour of the 50th anniversary of the 1970 Abortion Caravan - will make at least one other person feel less alone.

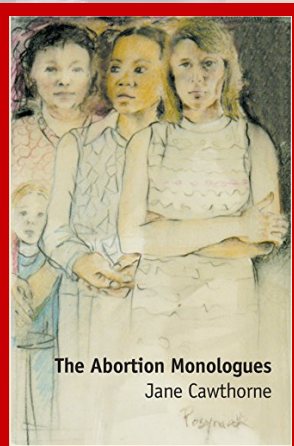


PHOTO CREDIT:  
Teresa Posyniak

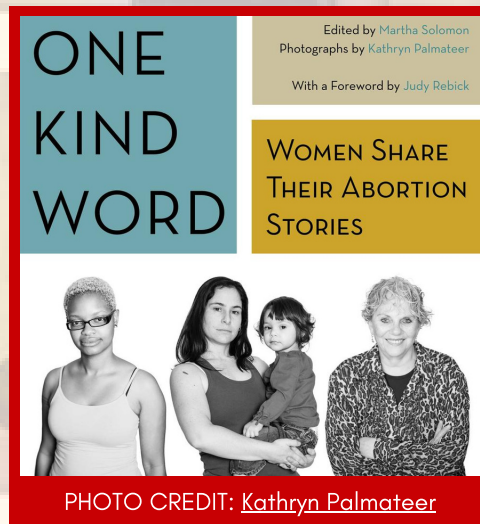


PHOTO CREDIT: Kathryn Palmateer



PHOTO CREDIT:  
The Sovereign Uterus

## LEARN MORE

- Explore the website for the [The Supine Cobbler](#), which is a five-woman play and uses the genre of the spaghetti western to represent the experience of clinical abortion.
- Read the book [One Kind Word: Women Share Their Abortion Experiences](#), which emerged from the website [Arts4Choice](#). This project uses portraiture as the medium for people to share and meet others who have had abortions.
- Read the stories in "Part 1: Speaking from Experience" in Without Apology: Writings on Abortion in Canada.
- Explore [The Choice VR](#), a virtual reality documentary created by Joanna Popinska that allows users to experience the reality of what it is like to get an abortion and converse with someone who has.
- Submit your own abortion story to [Shout Your Abortion](#), [the Sovereign Uterus](#), or [Women on Web](#).