

On the Divide

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Cueva, M., & Galant, L. (2021). *On the Divide*. [Motion picture]. United States. Fishbowl Films. (Available from <https://www.onthedividemovie.com/>).

The complexities of holding onto religious belief while advocating for reproductive equity are difficult to disentangle, deeply entrenched in systems and discourses that cannot easily be reduced. Yet, through Maya Cueva and Leah Galan's documentary *On the Divide* (2021), we can begin to see the vestiges of how faith can be both a weapon and source of salvation in the fight for a woman's right to healthcare. Through centralizing narratives of addiction, abuse, and poverty, viewers come to understand the powerful virtues of faith and the impactful influence of culture as they become the center for debates on reproductive justice in the city of McAllen, Texas. In the following, I summarize the central tenets of the documentary, before considering how feminist pedagogues can utilize this documentary to foster deeper conversations of identity, standpoint, and resilience.

On the Divide is centered on questions of faith, most prominently asking viewers to consider, can faith exist when violence, poverty, and racism are rampant? Can the religious support abortion? The documentary follows three Latinx residents of McAllen and centers on the Whole Woman's Health Clinic, the only remaining abortion clinic in the Rio Grande Valley prior to its closing in 2022. Over the course of several years, the film follows clinic security guard Rey, a devoted Catholic committed to protecting the patients and staff of the clinic. Rey prays for the safety and health of the women the clinic serves, while rebuffing the protestors who harass and condemn the patients just steps from the clinic's front door. We also meet Denisse, a volunteer escort at the clinic and young mother, who was raised Catholic, but began to question her pro-life beliefs when she became pregnant at 19. Denisse's experiences most profoundly illustrate the ability to out-grow faith, as she seeks hope not through religious commitment, but rather through the services provided and relationships fostered at the Whole Women's Health Clinic. Thus, the audience watches Denisse struggle to overcome the degradation of the healthcare services that she has committed herself to protecting. And finally, the film focuses most heavily on Mercedes, an ardent pro-life advocate and fervent Catholic, who has struggled with addiction, assault, and abuse throughout her life. Through these narratives the film begins to unravel the complex standpoints and structures that give rise to a pro-choice identity despite pronatalist and anti-abortion culture.

It is the story of Mercedes, a former gang member and young mother of two, that builds the most insight into the power of religion to shape abortion beliefs. Mercedes originally went to the Whole Women's Health Clinic seeking an abortion but was instead persuaded to join the anti-abortion protestors outside. Yet, as Mercedes finds salvation in the pro-life community, their support is merely superficial and does not extend to support her through the intense cycles of addiction and abuse she later experiences. Ultimately, it is only as Mercedes attempts to escape an abusive partner that she begins to understand abortion services can help women escape similar cycles of abuse. Through Mercedes, the viewers are invited to witness a pro-choice transformation, one which is not beholden to religious institutionalism, but instead guided by individual agency to choose how religion and pro-choice beliefs can co-exist. What *On the Divide* strongly advances is the recognition that pro-choice Catholics do exist, while also creating a powerful message of hope and unity for Catholics who are struggling in the post-Roe era.

For feminist educators, *On the Divide* can foster conversations of identity and identification theory as it exists in relation to intersectionality and resilience. In Communication, Sociology, Anthropology, and Gender Studies courses, for example, students can be asked to individually analyze the standpoints of Rey, Denisse, and Mercedes, disentangling how their cultural and religious identities converge and diverge in the context of pro-choice advocacy. As students often struggle to understand the theoretical bounds of standpoint theory and its unique contributions to feminist scholarship, *On the Divide* provides a template for recognizing how social locations shape outlook. For Rey, for example, a devoted Catholic who passionately prays for the women of the clinic, his experiences and identities may reveal how he came to be pro-choice. As the clinic's security guard, Rey tirelessly protects the patients and volunteers, yet remains equally as committed to his Catholic faith. His pro-choice identity must be examined within the context of the violence he has both witnessed and experienced, recognizing that much of his identity is shaped by the divide he transgresses as a pro-choice Catholic. Similarly, many of

the scenes within the documentary shed light on resilience, an amorphous communication theory that can be hard for students to grasp. Buzzanell (2021) constructs resilience as an adaptive-transformative feminist process made salient through communication. In probing students to consider how resilience may exist for the three protagonists of the film, educators can ask students to explain resilience as a process of adapting to hardship and overcoming setback.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this documentary may be an important touchstone as students seek to disentangle the complications and consequences of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. In the post-*Roe* world, centering abortion stories will be critical for feminist educators, yet we must approach the topic through empathy and engagement. As religiosity has come to be so strongly associated with anti-abortion beliefs, students are likely to recognize religion as only fostered through anti-abortion activism. However, in following Rey, Denisse, and Mercedes we come to understand how abortion is rarely a simple choice, but more often an imperative for survival. Especially for students who may not recognize the far-reaching consequences of overturning *Roe*, *On the Divide* is a poignant refraction of the world to come.

References

Buzzanell, P. M. (2021). Designing feminist resilience. In S. Eckert & I. Bachman (Eds.) *Reflections of feminist communication and media scholarship* (pp. 43-58). Routledge.