

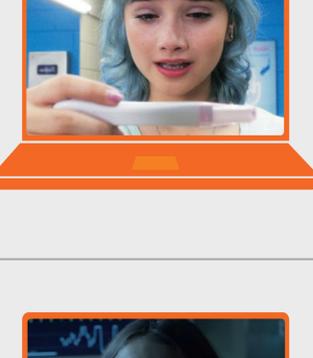
Abortion Onscreen in 2017

Portrayals of Abortion on American Television

For those involved in abortion advocacy and provision, 2017 marked a year of both transition and impending setbacks. Abortion portrayals in popular culture have begun to reflect this in small, but resonant, ways. Some of these parallels are realized retrospectively; for example, abortion rights protesters across the country have adopted the cinematic imagery of Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* as particularly appropriate for this moment in history, although the show had already begun filming before last year's Presidential election, and the novel on which it was based is over thirty years old. Other parallels, though, are deliberate: FX's *American Horror Story: Cult* begins with a portrayal of Election Night 2016, and spirals into the horrific from that moment. Regardless of the intentionality, dystopic and disturbing abortion plot lines are having a moment on American television in 2017. In addition to *The Handmaid's Tale* (which shows the executed body of an abortion provider in a rigidly conservative new world order) and *American Horror Story* (which shows a woman dying from a deliberately botched abortion inflicted by a deranged, sadistic, conservative pastor), there were the nightmarish abortions set in the past: *Underground's* portrayal of the brutal 1850s Georgia and *Alias Grace's* portrayal of the false choice between the heavy stigma of single motherhood and risk of dangerous abortion in 1840s Canada. There are otherwise powerless characters who attempt to make decisions about their reproduction as a way of asserting autonomy (e.g., *The White Princess*, *Orphan Black*); there are characters who are forced to get abortions (e.g., *Underground*, *Somewhere Between*). There are abortions that went terribly wrong (e.g., *Dirty Dancing*, *The Magicians*). This theme of control, coercion, danger, and risk is more pronounced this year than in previous years, and it will be interesting to see how it continues into 2018 as producers and writers share more content generated in the post-2016 election world.

And still, the new trends that we noted in 2015 and 2016 have continued: more comedies included abortion plot lines (e.g., *Brockmire*, *Veep*, *Wrecked*); more stories focused on the implications of the abortion (e.g., *The Fosters*), rather than the fraught decision-making process that has historically been the cornerstone of TV's abortion stories; more depictions of the actual abortion procedure were shown (e.g., *Degrassi: Next Class*, *GLOW*); and more women of color in these stories, as both women obtaining abortions and providers (e.g., *Underground*, *American Crime*, *Dirty Dancing*, *How to Get Away with Murder*).

In total, we identified 22 abortion plot lines on television in 2017 (on par with the past two years), including 11 stories in which an abortion was actually obtained. This proportion is slightly below what we noted in 2016, but is overall consistent with the pattern of about half of plotlines that address abortion actually including one.



Degrassi: Next Class (Netflix)

Episode: "#!RegretNothing"
Air Date: January 6, 2017

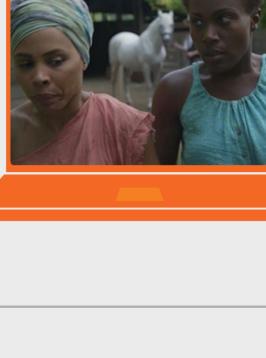
The *Degrassi* franchise has a history of abortion storylines going back to 1989. In this most recent plotline, high school student Lola is pregnant. We see Lola in the clinic, asking a counselor questions about the abortion like how long it will take ("5 minutes"), how she'll feel after ("some women feel a sense of loss, others, relief"), the risk of complications (minimal), and her future fertility (she can still have kids). The next scene is Lola in the surgical room, where the doctor gives her another chance to ask questions. "Am I the first 16-year old you've ever done this to?" Lola asks. He responds with comfort and normalization, "you're not the first today." After receiving support from a friend, Lola decides to share her abortion on her vlog. Instead of facing judgement, as Lola had feared, she finds support. With characteristic *Degrassi* empathy, this episode concisely shares medically accurate information about abortion, and showcases the provider as a warm, caring professional.



The Magicians (Syfy)

Episode: "Cheat Day"
Air Date: February 27, 2017

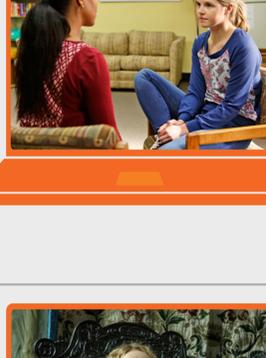
The Magicians is an adaptation of the fantasy novel by Lev Grossman, which follows a group of teenagers on their misadventures learning magic. This story focuses on Julia, who has magical abilities but was denied entrance to Brakebills University for Magical Pedagogy. Julia discovers that she's pregnant as a result of being raped by an evil god and attempts to get an abortion. However, the demonic fetus causes the physician to judge out her own eyes. In a later episode, we learn that Julia is no longer pregnant, but has lost her "shade," or magical soul, as a result – a tremendous cost. This mirrors a trend in fantastical portrayals of abortion in which the otherworldly, magical, or mystical aspects of the story only serve to make abortion more dangerous, horrific, or risky.



The Fosters (FreeForm/ABC Family)

Episode: "Sex Ed"
Air Date: February 28, 2017

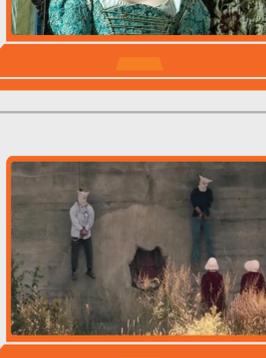
This family drama follows the lives of a Stef and Lena, a married lesbian couple and their five children. In this episode, 16-year-old Emma, the girlfriend of Stef and Lena's son Jesus, gets an abortion. She wonders if she should feel bad, and what it means if she doesn't – a realistic depiction of the complex emotions some women experience when deciding on an abortion. This story contrasts with a previous abortion of a wanted pregnancy on *The Fosters*, in which Lena gets an abortion to preserve her own health.



Underground (WGN America)

Episode: "Things Unsaid"
Air Date: March 15, 2017

Underground follows the lives of enslaved people in 1850s Georgia, documenting their efforts to find solace and freedom, and chronicling the complicated ways enslaved women's fertility and reproduction was coopted and coerced. In this storyline, Clara is pregnant after an affair with Hicks, and talks to Ernestine (Hicks's girlfriend) about what it's like to have children born in slavery. Clara then requests an abortifacient from Ernestine, but later changes her mind and decides to continue the pregnancy. Despite Clara's confidence, Hicks intervenes; he violently forces Clara to drink a mixture that causes an abortion because he does want her to birth a child into slavery. The brutal elements of reproductive coercion echo throughout this episode: Clara finds comfort in making a reproductive decision for herself and finding humanity in the potential of motherhood, even as that choice is brutally constrained by her enslavement – only to find that shred of autonomy again denied. These stories of women of color are critical to an understanding of the philosophical origins of today's reproductive justice movement.



American Crime (ABC)

Episodes: 3, 4 and 5
Air Date: March 26 - April 4, 2017

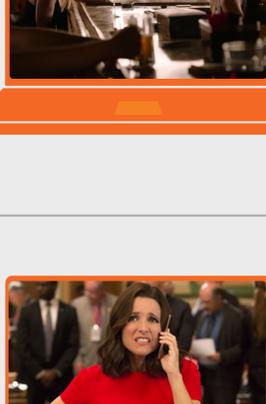
On this crime series, Shae is a teenager engaged in sex work, determined to have an abortion. With the help of a social worker, she navigates a judicial bypass process for North Carolina's parental consent law. The courtroom scenes are detailed and intense; a stern court representative tells Shae "not wanting a child is an insufficient reason" to receive an abortion. In response, Shae argues that she shouldn't need to seek her father's permission: "I shouldn't have to ask the person who made me want to screw guys in alleys if I can have an abortion." However, after being granted court permission, Shae is swayed by the memory of her ultrasound and the shouts of anti-abortion protesters while sitting in the clinic waiting room. She walks out and spends the next two episodes staring intently at her sonogram – until she is shockingly killed by another sex worker. This plotline offers a valuable contribution in accurately portraying barriers to access in great detail, but Shae's change of heart is an unrealistic depiction of women seeking abortion, the vast majority of whom are resolute in having made their decision before arriving at the clinic.



The White Princess (Starz)

Episode: "In Bed with the Enemy"
Air Date: April 16, 2017

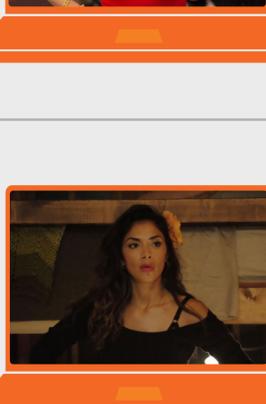
In this historical drama, Princess Elizabeth of York is the resistant bride of Henry VII, whom she still views as a usurper from the House of Lancaster. When she becomes pregnant, she asks her sister to seek out herbs to induce an abortion, but they do not work. Lizzie eventually resolves to continue the pregnancy, ensuring herself a dynastic marriage and delivering the heir to the throne. The abortion story is quickly averted, and meant only to show Lizzie's hatred of her new husband.



The Handmaid's Tale (Hulu)

Episode: "Offred"
Air Date: April 26, 2017

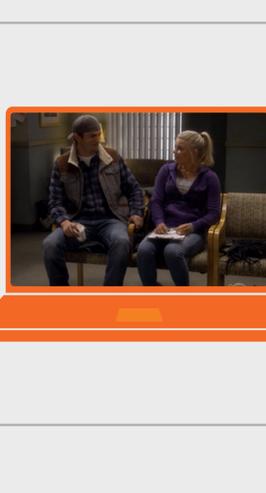
In this adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, we are confronted by a world in which fertile women are enslaved to wealthy infertile couples who enforce a strict social order based on extreme, conservative gender norms. In the first episode, we see hooded figures hanging off a wall, having been executed for violating the new social order. One hood displays a fish on it (a Catholic priest), one a pink triangle (a gay man), and finally a fetus marks the hood of the executed abortion provider. Including the persecution of an abortion provider in the opening episode provides commentary on anti-abortion ideas about gender, sexuality, and family, highlighting the extremity of reproductive social control.



Catastrophe (Amazon)

Episodes: 1 and 4
Air Date: April 28, 2017

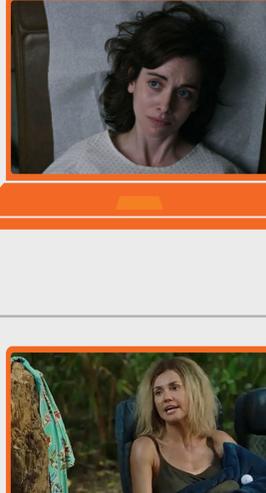
This British sitcom – available to American audiences for the first time this year – follows Sharon and Rob after their brief fling results in a pregnancy. Initially, Sharon (as well as her friends and parents) allude to the possibility of an abortion, but it becomes clear that Sharon views this as her "one shot" at parenthood (given her age) and truly wants to have a baby. Abortion comes up again when the couple is faced with the possibility of a Down Syndrome diagnosis, but is averted when the results come back as shockingly normal. Given that the premise of the show is Rob and Sharon's quick marriage and subsequent parenting misadventures, an abortion wouldn't have made narrative sense – despite the fact that it might have been the more plausible outcome for a real life couple.



Brockmire (IFC)

Episode: "Road Trip"
Air Date: May 3, 2017

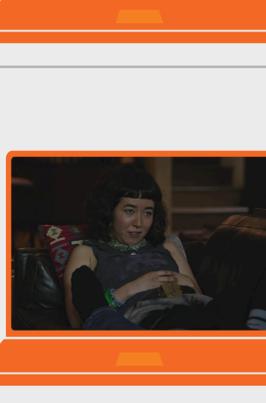
This comedy follows the life of Jim Brockmire, a former major league baseball announcer who falls from grace after an embarrassing on-air meltdown. In this episode, his on-again/off-again lover Jules finds out that she's pregnant and isn't sure what to do. She talks to Brockmire, and he reiterates that the decision is hers and offers to help pay for an abortion. Jules talks with others, too; a bartender who shares her abortion story, and her newly parenting friend who encourages Jules to continue the pregnancy. Ultimately, Jules decides to get an abortion, and Brockmire accompanies her to Pittsburgh. She has the abortion and thanks Brockmire for being supportive. He describes a comedic setback where he took her misoprostol and she has to go back to the clinic to get more. *Brockmire* manages to make this abortion depiction both funny and touching, mirroring comedies like *BoJack Horseman* and *You're the Worst* that depict abortion as something other than overly fraught and very serious.



Veep (HBO)

Episode: "Justice"
Air Date: May 7, 2017

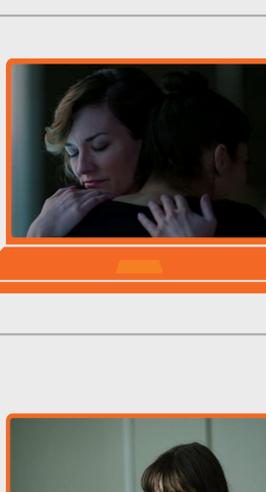
This season of *Veep* follows Selina Myer after her failed presidential reelection campaign. Selina is hopeful that the newly inaugurated President Montez is vowing her for a Supreme Court appointment when she's asked about her position on abortion. She jokes: "Well, I can give them my actual abortion if I can find it lying around here somewhere." Her staffer Richard retorts: "I'll check the freezer." While *Veep* has made jokes about abortion politics in the past, this line seems to speak to an ambiguously-resolved pregnancy plot line from Season 1, in which Selina had an expedient miscarriage after a highly politically inconvenient pregnancy. On this show, it's difficult to tell if Selina is actually disclosing a past abortion, or just making a flippant joke – though if the former, she'd join the ranks of Claire on *House of Cards* as a major president who has a history of abortion.



Dirty Dancing (ABC)

Episode: TV Movie
Air Date: May 24, 2017

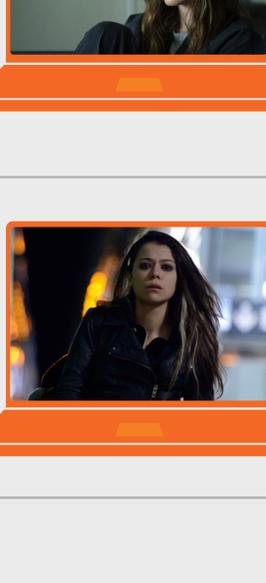
In this remake of the 1987 film, set in a Catskills resort in the 1960s, professional dancer Penny tells resort guest Baby that she's pregnant and needs help. Penny wants to have an abortion, but doesn't have the money for it and can't miss a dance competition performance at a nearby hotel in order to make her appointment. Baby gives money to Penny and Penny (Penny's dance partner) under the ruse of paying for dance lessons, and then trains to take Penny's place in the competition. While the remake varied slightly from the original (in the 1987 version Baby boldly asks her father for money without telling him why, as opposed to using the guise of dance lessons), it still maintained the abortion storyline as the primary driver of the film's plot. However, like the original, it still never uses the word "abortion."



The Ranch (Netflix)

Episodes: "My Next Thirty Years," "Things Change," and "Take Me Away from Here"
Air Date: June 16, 2017

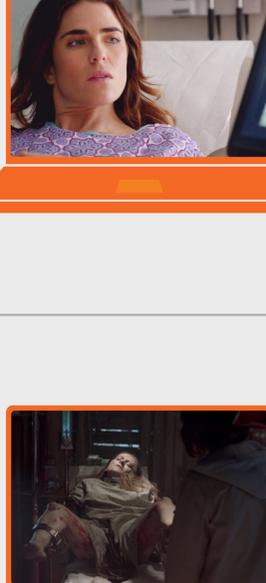
The Ranch chronicles the story of Colt, a man who returns to his family's Colorado ranch after a failed football career. When Colt's ex-girlfriend, Heather, becomes pregnant, he tries to propose to her, but she tells him she wants to have an abortion. Colt tries to convince her to continue the pregnancy, saying she hasn't thought it through, arguing that abortion is "the easy way out," and emphasizing repeatedly that he's anti-abortion. Ultimately, after encouragement from his mother, Colt apologizes to Heather and supports her by driving her to the clinic. After she fills out paperwork at the clinic, Heather changes her mind. Throughout the episode, we hear Colt making disparaging comments about her decision to have an abortion ("I ain't judging her. I just think what she's doing is totally wrong"). Heather's abrupt change of mind is perhaps unsurprising, given that the show's producers have said that the show is targeted to "conservative middle America."



GLOW (Netflix)

Episode: "Maybe It's All the Disco"
Air Date: June 23, 2017

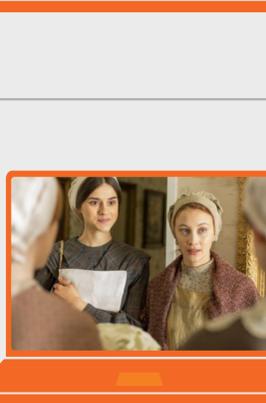
GLOW is a comedic drama about women's wrestling in the 1980s that follows Ruth, an earnest, hardworking actress struggling to find meaningful work. In the first few episodes, we learn that she had an affair with her best friend, Debbie's husband, Mark. In this episode, Ruth discovers that the affair resulted in pregnancy. She decides to have an abortion, and wrestling coach/director Sam accompanies her to the clinic. Sam checks in with her at the clinic, making sure that this is what she wants to do, and even jokes around with her to show his support. Most importantly, though, the story isn't about a fraught decision-making process. Instead, the abortion serves narratively as a way to move beyond Ruth and Mark's illicit relationship, particularly as the episode's parallel story shows Debbie and Mark struggle with their relationship and new parenthood. The abortion also marks a transition point for Ruth in her identity as a wrestler: when the doctor asks Ruth if the description of the procedure makes sense, Ruth whispers, "I'm a wrestler," before correcting herself and saying "Yes, I understand." The abortion is, in many ways, a new start for this character.



Wrecked (TBS)

Episode: "Tony Pepperoni"
Air Date: July 11, 2017

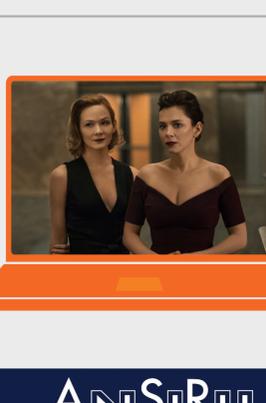
Owen is a plane crash survivor living among fellow castaways on a tropical island. When fellow survivor Rosa – in a parody of mental illness – announces she is pregnant with Owen's baby (a medical impossibility), Owen and castaway Florence cater to the delusion by staging a fake abortion clinic. Florence provides real counseling to Rosa, who then decides to continue her "pregnancy." She then "gives birth" to a coconut. Within this absurd storyline, it's unclear if Florence's spoof of an abortion counselor is supporting a patient's choice is itself a parody, or a moment of insight.



Casual (Hulu)

Episode: "The Hermit and the Moon"
Air Date: July 31, 2017

This comedic drama follows tech mogul Alex and his newly divorced sister, Valerie, as they live together and raise Valerie's teenage daughter, Laura. In this episode, Alex's girlfriend Judy breaks up with him, which he doesn't realize until his roommate Rae confirms it. In a prior episode, Rae and Alex had drunken sex, and now she discovers that she's pregnant. When they discuss what they want to do about the pregnancy, she shares that she wishes she was in her 20s so she could say she's "not ready" for a baby, or that she was in her late 30s so this could be her last chance at parenthood. Alex suggests that she have an abortion, and she responds, "no one ever wants to have an abortion, that's physical and psychological agony." This season finale ends in a cliffhanger in which Rae's pregnancy decision remains unknown. For a show that centers around casual sex, the association of abortion with such negative outcomes is surprising; yet Rae's ambivalence does mirror what many women experience when facing an unintended pregnancy.



Somewhere Between (ABC)

Episode: "Fate Takes a Holiday"
Air Date: August 8, 2017

On *Something Between*, Laura is a high-powered news producer whose daughter, Serena, is killed by a serial killer. Laura attempts to commit suicide, but instead wakes up two weeks before Serena's abduction. She then launches her own investigation to prevent the murder from taking place, and uncovers the fact that her best friend, Mara, had an affair with her husband, Tom. Mara got pregnant, and Tom forced her to have an abortion. Mara describes the pregnancy as a loss comparable with losing a child, calling it "her trauma." She later becomes unhinged, threatening Laura with a gun in Serena's presence. The clear implication is that the abortion has contributed to Mara's mental instability, which is dangerous for both her and those around her.



The Sinner (USA)

Episode: "False Pregnancy"
Air Date: August 9, 2017

This show follows Cora, who kills a young man while being with his girlfriend on the beach but has no idea why. Playing being questioned by a detective, Cora explains that she met the young man five years prior at a bar and they had sex. After realizing she was pregnant, Cora was unable to contact the young man or tell her very strict and religious parents. Cora tells the detective that she didn't want to get an abortion because of her Catholic upbringing, so she stepped into traffic, leading to a broken hip, concussion, and causing a miscarriage. However, it's later revealed this didn't actually happen, and was a figment of Cora's imagination as she tries to cope with her ongoing trauma and likely mental illness. It is difficult to interpret what Cora's delusions mean narratively, but it is clear that she has been very traumatized by her zealously religious parents, and that – had she actually been pregnant – abortion certainly wouldn't have been an option.

Orphan Black (BBC America)

Episode: "To Right the Wrongs of Many"
Air Date: August 12, 2017

The series finale of *Orphan Black* includes a flashback of Sarah, a clone, outside a Planned Parenthood clinic, trying to decide whether or not to get an abortion. The viewers already know both that Sarah has a daughter and that she has had an abortion (which was disclosed back in Season 1's finale), so this moment is less about Sarah's choice, and more about showing that choice as a way for Sarah to make a decision about her body and her pregnancy in a world where her very DNA is patented and she and her "sisters" bodies have been used in ways beyond their control for the benefit of others. In this way, Sarah's decision to continue her pregnancy is an illustration of her desire and ability to control her own future.

How to Get Away with Murder (ABC)

Episodes: "Do Cry Somewhere Else," "It's War," "He Made a Terrible Mistake," and "I'm Going Away"
Air Date: February 9, 16, 23 and September 28, 2017

Shonda Rhimes, a board member of Planned Parenthood, reliably includes abortion stories on her many shows (including *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, and *Scandal*). This *How to Get Away with Murder* story arc began in February, when Laurel discovered she was pregnant. At first she reacts negatively to others suggesting abortion, but ultimately reveals she is, in fact, considering it. The end of Season 3 includes a scene between Laurel and her doctor, in which she views the ultrasound of her pregnancy and hears the heartbeat, and the doctor accurately discusses the gestational age limitations on abortion in Pennsylvania. In the beginning of Season 4, Laurel tells her father that she's gotten an abortion – but this is later revealed to be a lie intended to protect the baby from her father (who is responsible for killing the baby's father, Wes). Laurel continues the pregnancy but goes into early labor, and the baby requires extensive CPR to survive. Laurel's decision to continue her pregnancy is presented as a way for her to assert control over her otherwise chaotic life, preserve Wes's memory, and rebel against her father.

American Horror Story: Cult (FX)

Episode: "Winter of Our Discontent"
Air Date: September 24, 2017

American Horror Story has reliably delivered on horrifying abortion stories in seasons past, and *AHS: Cult* is no exception. In this plot line, Kai and Winter infiltrate a "Judgment House" created by the ultra-conservative and sadistic Pastor Charles, in which each room of the house punishes real people for their sins. They find a woman strapped to a gurney bleeding to death from an abortion begging for help, and Pastor Charles' voice comes over the loudspeaker asking, "Who shall speak for the unborn?" In other rooms, an addict is being pumped full of drugs and another man is being held captive and about to be stabbed through the chest for being a "sodomite," as Pastor Charles recites Leviticus. However, Winter and Kai discover that none of these individuals are actually "guilty" of these "sins": the woman was at Planned Parenthood seeking treatment for an infection; the addict was in rehab; the gay man was volunteering at an AIDS clinic. Thus, what is horrifying here is not the abortion itself (although it is quite gruesome) but the violent, judgmental hypocrisy of Pastor Charles.

Alias Grace (Netflix)

Episode: "Part 2"
Air Date: November 3, 2017

Another Margaret Atwood adaptation, *Alias Grace* tells the story of Mary and Grace, two young women working as maidservants in late 19th century Canada. Mary is the more powerful of the two; she shares with Grace lessons about social class, politics, feminism, and – most importantly – the dangers inherent in men's affections. However, Mary fails to heed her own warnings, and she becomes pregnant after an affair with her employer's son. Grace is at first uncomfortable with Mary's decision to have an abortion, but ultimately supports her, understanding that Mary is facing dual stigmas: becoming an unmarried, single mother whom no one would hire, or risking her life by having an abortion and preserving her employability. She soon dies after a botched, illegal abortion. Mary is shown as trapped by her pregnancy and circumstance, with abortion as a potential solution, albeit a dangerous one that costs her life.

The Girlfriend Experience (Starz)

Episode: "Family"
Air Date: December 3, 2017

This political drama follows the careers of Anna, a woman engaged in sex work, and her lover Emily, who works at a Republican Super PAC. Anna shares with Emily that she purposefully had sex with a client without a condom in order to get pregnant, and is thrilled to start a family together. Emily is dismayed by the pregnancy and says that she doesn't love Emily, breaking up with her and breaking her heart. After a series of failed attempts to win Emily back, Anna decides to have an abortion. We see her in the clinic on a GYN exam table, where a provider instructs her to breathe deeply during the procedure. The clinic is ended and sterile, evoking the coldness with which Emily ended her relationship with Anna. *The Girlfriend Experience* joins *The Fosters* in portraying a queer couple accessing abortion care.

For more information about the Abortion Onscreen project, contact Gretchen Sisson, PhD at Gretchen.Sisson@ucsf.edu or visit www.abortiononscreen.com

