

2012

# "Condoms and Candy": Pro-choice Students on Campus

Jordan Rebecca Kea

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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"CONDOMS AND CANDY": PRO-CHOICE STUDENTS ON CAMPUS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography & Anthropology

by

Jordan Rebecca Kea  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2010  
August 2012

## DEDICATION

Firstly, I dedicate this thesis to the three most resilient women I know, Lisa Kea, Genelle Myers and Laura Kea, without your guidance, constant badgering and unwavering support this work would not be possible. I also dedicate this to my fiancé, Sean Ahrend, who has listened to me rant for over two years and has never stopped championing my work. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to those who stand up for their beliefs even when it seems like no one is listening.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start my thanking my advisor, Dr. Helen Regis, for giving me the chance to prove that I belonged in the Geography and Anthropology department. If it wasn't for your dedication I would have never had the opportunity to show what I am capable of accomplishing, thank you. As an advisor your constructive criticisms, feminist insights, and your own field experiences offered me the guidance, support and perseverance needed to complete this thesis. I have had a transformative experience during my time under your wing. I can now leave Louisiana State University as an intellectual... a feat that I never truly believed was possible. Thank you for all of your support both in and outside of the classroom.

I would not dare forget about my wonderful committee members, Dr. Kathe Managan and Dr. Dana Berkowitz. You both presented new perspectives and ideas to inform my work which has helped make this project complete. The two of you helped me to understand myself as a feminist, which has assisted me in becoming a better daughter, sister, scholar, and person. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. David Chicoine; David thank you for assuring me that everything will work out. I had an unbelievable experience with you in Peru and I will never forget the insights you offered me. I will never be able to drink another Pisco Sour without thinking of you. To my fellow graduate students, Beverly Clement, Rebecca Brown and Caitlyn McNabb, I will always remember you three. You all made me feel so welcome, even when I felt like I didn't belong.

Scott and Lisa Kea, thank you for not being afraid to talk about sex. I know this may sound strange, however, because of your open and honest parenting style, I truly value open communication which has been a vital element for my research. The two of you have given me

the strength to talk about things that others may ignore. To my younger sister, Laura Kea, if it wasn't for you I would have probably completed this thesis months ago; however, I could not imagine not being able to hang out with you every day. You gave me the strength to continue working even when I believed it was pointless. Nana and Papa, thank you for giving me a place to relax and revive myself. If it wasn't for the two of you I would not be the person I am today. I love you both.

To my fiancé, Sean Ahrend, thank you for disagreeing with me. Your perspectives and questions have helped make this thesis so much stronger. You have offered me more support than I can ever repay. You have seen me cry, laugh, scream, cry again and everything in between; you have always been a pillar of strength for me, never forgetting to buy me ice cream when I'm sad. We are a great team and together we will have so much to look forward to. Thank you for caring about my opinions even though we rarely see eye to eye.

I can never express how grateful I am to all the VOX members that have allowed me to follow them around and constantly bombard them with questions. VOX is a truly phenomenal group of individuals and I feel so lucky for the opportunity that I had to spend time with all of them. Thank you Charlie for all of your help, you are an amazing activist, person and friend. Lastly, to all you feminists out there, thank you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Why Voices for Planned Parenthood?.....	1
Defining Feminism and other Key Terms.....	2
Conceptual Framework.....	5
A Brief History of Planned Parenthood.....	8
Methodologies, Methods and Analysis.....	8
Reflexivity.....	13
How this Thesis is Organized: Chapter Descriptions.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: VOX: THE ORGANIZATION OF STUDENTS ACTIVISTS.....	16
VOX and Planned Parenthood.....	17
VOX as a Community of Practice.....	19
The Domain: Members, Representation, and Feminist Activism.....	20
The Community: Meetings, Communications and Storytelling.....	24
The Practice: Outreach.....	27
Conclusions.....	32
CHAPTER THREE: FREE SPEECH ALLEY: A STUDENT FORUM.....	34
Brief History of Free Speech Alley.....	35
Contemporary Usage.....	39
Why the Alley?.....	42
Social Movements Use of the Space.....	45
VOX: Private to Public.....	49
Conclusions.....	51
CHAPTER FOUR: ENCOUNTERING RESISTANCE IN A FEMINIST STUDENT ORGANIZATION.....	52
Forms of Resistance.....	53
Motherhood.....	58
Abortion.....	60
Sexuality.....	64
Cross-sex Interactions.....	67
Conclusions.....	68
CONCLUSION.....	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	75
VITA.....	86

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood tabling session.....	28
Figure 2.2: Examples of pamphlets and handouts distributed by VOX.....	30
Figure 3.1. Example of a Free Speech Alley session in the fall semester of 1966.....	36
Figure 3.2: Snapshot of Free Speech Alley.....	41
Figure 3.3: Side view of Free Speech Alley.....	41
Figure 4.1: Image of VOX tabling session.....	65

## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the dynamics of a feminist student organization within the context of a college campus in southern Louisiana. Through a methodology of participant observation, interviews, spot observations and archival research I examine how this pro-choice organization navigates campus public space. This project focuses on aspects of collaboration or collective action within a network of organizations, the participation of members, and the discursive processes of storytelling and audience effects. This collaborative ethnography also investigates how cross-sex interactions mediate topics of motherhood, abortion, and sexuality.



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It was in the fall of 2006 and I was a Residential Assistant in the East Dorms. I had created a Women's health wall with pamphlets about birth control, STD's/HIV, pap smears, etc. You know, mostly things that freshman girls would need information about... that they could take and read in private. My Residential Life Coordinator told me to take it down since I was just "enlisting girls to have irresponsible sex before marriage". I told him they needed this information but he kept at it. My RA [Residential Assistant] contract said I was not allowed to speak to the media. But my friend Emma knew about VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood and I went to a meeting. They agreed to publish a story on my behalf, after that my Residential Life Coordinator let the issue go and I stayed on with VOX.

—Jennifer, VOX member

Women's health, reproductive rights and family planning have long been contested matters. Jennifer's experience is, unfortunately, not a unique one. However, a student group on her college campus offered her an outlet to promote awareness about her situation and, more importantly, offered an opportunity for discussion on the larger issues surrounding sexual and reproductive rights. This group is a feminist pro-choice student organization called VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood<sup>1</sup>.

### **Why Voices for Planned Parenthood?**

VOX is not the only feminist organization on campus that Jennifer could have turned to for help. There are a variety of different feminist organizations that operate on this campus, a public university located in the Deep South. Some promote awareness of sexual identity and LGBT issues, for example. Others address feminist concerns in an academic manner and still others focus on the University as an employer and issues of workplace equity. However, VOX is the only organization that specifically promotes awareness of reproductive health issues and pro-

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<sup>1</sup> VOX is Latin for voice.

choice initiatives. Most VOX members have similar stories of why they decided to join the VOX family; these stories will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.

In this project, I examine this openly pro-choice student organization. This organization is situated on a public university campus in southern Louisiana. For the remainder of this work, I will refer to this university simply as Central University or CU. I have been conducting participant observation with the organization for over 14 months. VOX is an extremely dynamic organization and I have enjoyed learning about individual members' intentions, desires, and fears, as well as their collective goals and strategies.

As a VOX member, I have had the opportunity to participate in meetings, events and other group functions (which will be discussed in Chapter 2). During these events, I took photographs, field and analytical notes. I have also conducted spot observations and interviews with both VOX members and nonmembers. In the final phase of the project, I embarked on archival research to explore the history of public spaces for student activism at the university. Because the confidentiality and privacy of VOX members is of the greatest importance to my project, each person will be given a pseudonym and their exact job titles and positions will be modified. Photographs that illustrate the text will not include anyone's face or anything that would be potentially identifiable. Throughout the fieldwork process, no real names were used in my personal field notes.

### **Defining Feminism and other Key Terms**

There are several terms that I will employ throughout this work that may require some elaboration. These terms include: *feminism*, *pro-choice*, *resistance* and *agency*. I acknowledge

that all of these terms can be defined in many ways; however, I will briefly define how I will employ them for this thesis.

What is feminism? Who is considered to be a feminist? There are many answers to these questions and there are many branches of feminist theory that have tried to tackle such questions. Beasley (2005) discusses five branches of feminism, such branches include: modernist (emancipatory/liberationist) feminisms, gender difference, multiple differences, feminist social constructionism and postmodern feminisms (anti-essentialist). Examining all of these branches of feminism is well beyond the scope of this work. Judith Lorber (2010: 1) defines feminism as ~~a~~ "a social movement whose basic goal is equality between women and men." This is a very basic definition of feminism but it does also suggest a critique of misogyny, as well as, a critique of patriarchal social arrangements. That is, an inherent hatred of the female sex as well as an understanding of feminine gender qualities as undesirable or lesser in comparison to masculine qualities. This misogynistic view leads to a social system that places the central roles of leadership and power in the hands of the men that occupy that social system.

I do not wish to essentialize feminist theory and debates surrounding such theory; many women and men have labored hard to clarify and understand feminist objectives. The field is diverse and there continues to be vigorous debates. With that said, for this thesis, I will focus on feminism and feminist work in relation to sexual and reproductive rights. Every VOX member proudly proclaims that he or she is a feminist and that the organization operates with a feminist agenda. For me, feminism and being a feminist is an extremely personal experience. I consider myself a feminist for many different reasons, and those reasons can greatly vary among individuals. However, like Johnson, Faulkner, Iacobelli, Moran, Sawyer and Ward (2011), I do not feel that a person can be a pro-life feminist. Being pro-choice is to advocate a woman's right

to control her own reproductive body. Restricting a woman's ability to choose what's best for her body and her life, is against my core understandings of feminism. This sentiment is shared by the majority of VOX members that I have encountered.

There are numerous notions of what constitutes "resistance." For this work, I will employ Sherry Ortner's (2006: 44) understanding of resistance, which highlights the presence and play of power in most forms of human relationship and activity. Two types of resistance will be discussed in this thesis. First, I will investigate how VOX utilizes organized and everyday forms of resistance when negotiating "private" issues in the "public sphere" (Chapter 3). Secondly, I will try to unpack what types of resistance VOX experiences from non-members, which I claim is significantly highlighted in cross-sex interactions. Because the majority of interactions between VOX and nonmembers were preliminary cross-sex encounters, I noticed that the responses differed greatly between male and female students and the students utilized different strategies in each interaction; this will be discussed further in Chapter 4. I will work with the notion that power shifts and changes and, therefore, there is no fixed notion of resistance. Ortner (2006) critiques many resistance studies because they tend to ignore the understanding that individuals' have of their own intentions, desires and fears.

In order to understand VOX's actions I will examine how they employ *agency*, both individually and collectively. Ortner (2006: 110) discusses agency in depth and states:

I see subjectivity as the basis of "agency," a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity—of (culturally constructed) feelings, thoughts, and meanings.

I agree with Ortner that intentionality is a central dynamic when discussing agency. In the case of VOX members, their intentions (aims, goal, ideals, and desires) critically shape their actions

and agendas. Giddens' (1979) demonstrates that actors can employ their own agency and are capable of deciding to act on or act against certain structures. VOX members act against governmental regulations that try to control individuals' reproductive bodies, the economic structures that prohibit equal access to healthcare, and the apparent dichotomy of private versus public issues.

I am utilizing the understanding that everyone has agency and has the ability to employ that agency. Moreover, an actor's or group's agency is not a static characteristic. Ortner (2006) understands agency to be unequally distributed, some have more agency and others have less. Also, agency distribution is "culturally constructed and maintained" (Ortner 2006: 139). During my analysis, I have noted how the distribution of agency shifts according to its context. Examples of how VOX experiences different levels of agency will be discussed in the following chapters.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this thesis, I have framed the CU VOX chapter as both a community of practice and as a social movement organization (SMO). These frameworks highlight VOX's most important features as a feminist student organization. There are various aspects of social movements that can be examined, however, for the scope of this work I have chosen to focus on several specific aspects of collaboration or collective action (networks of organizations), participation (membership) and discursive processes (storytelling and audience effects). Ultimately, all of these features of social movements organizations assist in finding a remedy or solution to a "problematic situation or issue" (Benford and Snow 2000: 616).

To begin, Benford and Snow (2000: 614) assert that “collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of social movement organizations.” It is a common feature of social movement organizations to find allies and collaborate with other like-minded groups (see Rosenthal, Fingrutd, Ethier, Karant and McDonald 1985; Taylor 1989; Rose 1997; Stewart, Settles and Winter 1998; Duncan 1999; Benford and Snow 2000; Paley 2001; Mann 2002; Taylor 2005; Gordon 2007; and Wies 2011). Networks of organizations have the ability to offer aid and support (economic or otherwise) and can offer an avenue to introduce an SMO’s agenda to larger audiences (Rosenthal, Fingrutd, Ethier, Karant and McDonald 1985). There are multiple types of collective action (Paley 2001) and, generally, collective action and collaborations are mutually beneficial to the actors and organizations involved, which helps explain reasons for engaging in collection action and continued participation with SMO’s (Benford and Snow 2000). In the case of VOX there is a collaborative effort between Planned Parenthood, VOX chapters and other feminist organizations on campus; all of these elements will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

Second, there are many motives behind an individual’s decision to participate in social movement organizations. According to Verta Taylor (1989: 766) “commitment refers to the willingness of people to do what must be done, regardless of personal rewards and sacrifice.” So, what would motivate membership to an SMO? In the case of VOX, I argue that intrapersonal variables, such as personality, beliefs, and life experiences (Taylor 1989; Duncan 1999; Stewart, Settles and Winter 1998), and a feminist consciousness are some of the main motivations behind CU VOX members’ participation. In Chapter 2, I outline specific members’ decisions to join VOX’s cause.

Thirdly, discursive processes refers ~~to~~ the talk and conversations—the speech acts—and written communications of movement members that occur primarily in the context of, or in relation to, movement activities” (Benford and Snow 2000: 623). These processes serve several purposes in regards to CU VOX. I will look specifically at the process of storytelling among VOX members as a method of highlighting issues, events and beliefs in the group (Benford and Snow 2000), as well as how storytelling is used as a method to advance VOX’s social movement initiatives (Crawley and Broad 2004). Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992: 465) utilize cross-sex communication as a mode of framing miscommunication that occurs due to ~~gender/cultural differences in norms of appropriate discourse.”~~ I use this framework in Chapter 4 as a means to investigate cross-sex interactions that occur as an audience effect during VOX outreach.

Lastly, I would like to briefly outline how I apply Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of ~~communities of practice”~~ in this thesis. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) summarize the concept:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. A social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

In Chapter 2, I go into greater depth on why I have chosen to frame the organization in this manner. I also discuss three vital characteristics of communities of practice: domain, community, and practice (Wenger 2007).

## **A Brief History of Planned Parenthood**

Margaret Sanger, founder of the American Birth Control League (now known as Planned Parenthood), was a pioneer for women's reproductive rights<sup>2</sup>. In 1916, Sanger, her sister, and a friend opened America's first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York. Sanger believed that it was a woman's right to decide if and when to become a mother. She asserted:

The basic freedom of the world is woman's freedom. A free race cannot be born out of slave mothers. A woman enchained cannot choose but give a measure of that bondage to her sons and daughters. No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother (1997: 94).

This passage takes on several meanings, especially if you consider Sanger's eugenics background. However, one should not overlook her primary argument that women's bodies and women's fertility has historically been a domain controlled by men. Women cannot be free from such forms of patriarchal oppression until they actively claim ownership of their own reproductive abilities. It is astonishing that the debates of the early 1900's are still—more than 110 years later—at the forefront of American politics<sup>3</sup>.

## **Methodologies, Methods and Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, I have conducted participant observation with the VOX organization for over 14 months. With all of the data gathered from my fieldwork, meaning my "intimate participation in a community and the observation of modes of behavior and the organization of social life" (Keesing and Strathern 1998) within the context of VOX, I propose a reflexive ethnography based on those observations. Harry F. Wolcott (2008) in his book

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<sup>2</sup>It's important to note that Sanger did not mean all women, she is referring to women who were deemed fit. Sanger aligned herself with the eugenics movement. The eugenics movement was an attempt to improve a society's genetic quality by practices of "better breeding." This movement was the most prominent in the United States between 1900 and 1940 (Allen 1997).

<sup>3</sup>As this thesis is being finalized, American women's access to birth control is once again called into question by presidential candidates, media commentators, entertainers, Catholic hierarchy of educational and faith-based institutions and the political arms of evangelical groups.



*Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* goes into great detail to describe the dimensions involved in putting together an ethnography. He offers three methods for gaining ethnographic information; these categories include participant observation, interviewing and archival research. Wolcott goes even further to define each category and refers to them as: experiencing, enquiring, and examining.

Participant observation works through one's own personal experience through our senses. By revealing my own subjectivity, I hope to "maximize the potential of fieldwork as a personal experience rather than deny it" (Wolcott 2008: 49). Enquiring (e.g. interviewing) deals with the active role of asking. For this project, I have participated in casual conversations, key consultant interviews, and informal interviews with other VOX members and nonmembers. From these interviews, my main objectives are to gain an understanding of member identification, how and when they became interested in women's health, sexual health, and reproductive choice, and furthermore, how they chose VOX as an outlet for that interest. Lastly, by conducting research about the history of this campus's public spaces as venues for social movements and public forums on campuses (discussed in Chapter 3), I am able to assess why SMO's select campus public space as a venue to further their interests.

There are many methods in archival research; Marc Ventresca and John Mohr (2002) take care to detail all of these diverse methods. For this project, I use the term archival research in the classical sense of the term:

Archival methods are those that involve the study of historical documents; that is, documents created at some point in the relatively distant past, providing us access that we might not otherwise have to the organizations, individuals, and events of that earlier time (Ventresca and Mohr 2002: 805).

The historical documents I have chosen to analyze include: several newspaper articles and editorials, oral histories, Student Government Association records, and detailed campus timelines. I take a historiographic approach where I use the archival material to gain insights on the emergence of “distinctive institutional arrangements, politics, and change” (Ventresca and Mohr 2002: 807). Specifically, I consider how CU’s free speech alley came to be constructed in an era of campus activism in which civil rights and women’s rights were very much under consideration. Far from being a neutral or value-free institutional space, free speech alley takes part in historical struggles for what political (and religious) debate on a university campus should look like.

While analyzing my data, field notes, interviews, photographs, and archival research, I have thematically coded each topic. I noted recurring themes of resistance, agency, public representations of VOX, and public discourses surrounding topics of motherhood, abortion and sexuality. I have also analyzed how locale (e.g. meeting rooms, public activism, etc.) affected those themes. Through my data collection I have allowed for the juxtaposition of what people say they do and what they are observed to do (Agar 1996). These categories will be discussed in the remaining chapters of this thesis.

I approach this collaborative ethnography from the perspective outlined in Luke Eric Lassiter’s (2005) *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. This form of ethnography is necessary for this project to assist in breaking down the barriers between myself and my consultants. In this collaborative project I share the interpretative authority with VOX members who often feel that their own voices are silenced because their pro-choice understandings are not the dominant belief on the CU campus. This marginalized position often leads to a morphing of VOX members’ views by the dominant pro-life campus view. There are four main principles

that Lassiter outlines for the proper construction of collaborative ethnographies: ethical and moral responsibility to consultants, honesty about fieldwork processes, accessible and dialogic writing and collaborative reading, writing and co-interpretation of ethnographic texts with consultants. All of these features highlight that ethical and moral responsibility to consultants is of the greatest importance in collaborative ethnographies. When Lassiter (2005: 79) speaks of consultants he refers to them as ~~not~~ as informants, but as co-intellectuals and collaborators who help to shape our ethnographic understandings, our ethnographic texts, and our larger responsibility to others as researchers, citizens, and activists.” Also, as Clifford (1983: 139) recommends I quote my consultants ~~regularly~~ and at length.” This study will ~~give~~ a voice” (Lassiter 2005: 53) to the people who actively support reproductive rights in southeastern Louisiana.

I believe that a more collaborative method of writing offer great insights to this project. My key consultants, Charlie and Jennifer, agreed to read my drafts and offer input on my writings. This writing method has helped me gain a more complex and more complete understanding of the organization and VOX group members. For instance, the three of us met up and discussed different drafts of this work. Chapter 2 of this thesis outlines VOX tabling sessions and what types of visual imagery is presented by CU VOX. During one specific tabling session I discuss in detail pictures that were hung around the table, I thought very little about who produced the images. However, Charlie pointed out that those images were not produced by Planned Parenthood and she cautioned me of the importance of distinguishing when images and text were produced by PPFA and when they were the work of a student. For the objectives of this project, I argue that collaborating will be more helpful and effective than it is detrimental. For

further discussion on collaborative methods, analysis and ethnographies refer to Eric Lassiter (2008), Joanne Rappaport (2008), and Rachel Breunlin and Helen A. Regis (2009).

In addition, the confidentiality of my consultants is vital to this project and I take every precaution to assure that their identities remain private. As Lassiter (2008) recommends, when I refer to my consultants in my field notes I always use their pseudonyms to help further protect their identities. This is also another benefit to the collaborative style of writing; if a person does not feel comfortable with certain personal information included in the writings it will be removed. Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee that the use of pseudonyms and the changing of the organization's name and location will completely protect my consultants. However, I have followed IRB protocols and my consultants have all given informed consent. My consultants and I have discussed at length what the project involves and they understand the risks that their involvement may entail. Most VOX members have told me that I can use their real name and images and, in fact, Skylar declared "I am a proud feminist and I don't need to hide it." This seems to be the general sentiment of CU VOX members; they don't think that their identities should be concealed and they are excited that they finally get to tell their stories.

I feel it is important to establish that I am a VOX member and I have taken a very active role in VOX activities. Because of the small number of members available for each function and/or event, the group required my assistance in order to operate properly. For the most part, I actively participated in the group activities. Fortunately, for the purposes of this project, my involvement with VOX has assisted me in creating and maintaining rapport with members. Also, by actively participating, I have directly experienced the different elements (i.e. tabling, meetings, forums, etc.) that are involved with this student organization.

## **Reflexivity**

Being a pro-choice woman has been something of a struggle of mine throughout most of my high school and college years. I was raised in a religious setting and all of my family members, excluding my father, are very active members of their church communities. Because of my church background, I am made more aware of the moral reasons why my religion does not support pro-choice beliefs and initiatives. I deviate greatly from my Church of God upbringing; I am pro-choice, I support same sex marriage and I do not think that sex should be reserved for marriage. Nevertheless, my mother has always taught me that I have the power to make my own value judgments. She has always instilled in me a sense that I, as a woman, could accomplish anything that I wanted to accomplish. When I dreamed of being the first woman President of the United States, she told me that I would have to work harder than all the boys, but if I really wanted it, I could absolutely achieve it. My mother is the strongest and most supportive woman that I know and because of her I will always believe that women are capable of undertaking anything.

When I was growing up, our family dinners often revolved around the topic of sex. Sex was not considered a crude subject to discuss; rather, it was considered a natural and healthy topic that we could talk about openly. I was never embarrassed to ask my parents questions about biology or contraceptive use. The biology class I attended in high school focused on the biological aspects of reproduction, with very little time dedicated to contraception.

These are some of the main reasons why I am a feminist, an activist and a member of VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood. My ultimate goal is to teach secondary education. Understanding how to approach issues of sexual health with students is very important to me. I had been looking for a forum in which to discuss my interests in promoting comprehensive sex education and that's when I discovered VOX. I became a member of VOX in the spring of 2010.

This organization offers me a judgment-free environment to discuss issues surrounding reproduction, sexuality and gender inequalities.

### **How this Thesis is Organized: Chapter Descriptions**

There are many interesting dynamics dealing with reproductive rights and reproductive health within the context of the student activist group, VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood. A common thread of themes can be seen throughout this thesis. Most themes overlap and appear in each of the remaining chapters.

Chapter 2 focuses on VOX and its connection and collaboration with Planned Parenthood, other VOX chapters and other campus organizations. As mentioned earlier, I will approach the CU VOX chapter as a social movement organization and as a community of practice; this chapter will elaborate on those frameworks. I introduce some of the most active members and explore their intentions, desires, and key feminist goals. VOX meetings, communications, storytelling, recruitment and other forms of outreach will also be presented.

Chapter 3 initiates a dialogue with notions of public spheres, social movements and social movement organizations on college campuses. This chapter will look specifically at Louisiana State University's Free Speech Alley as a space for student and faculty activism. Archival research will be presented to demonstrate how a history of activism has existed on LSU's campus and how, or if, that history has contributed to current social movements and social movement communities located on campus.

And finally, Chapter 4 examines cross-sex interactions and the miscommunications or student resistance that may occur during VOX events. The main themes that I focus on are the discursive processes that surround the notions of motherhood, abortion and sexuality. I will

attempt to deconstruct what types of gender stereotyping are reinforced or dispelled by these cross-sex interactions. This chapter investigates concepts of “appropriate” gender norms and how they are displayed on a college campus.

Lastly, in the conclusion of this thesis I discuss how all of these themes intersect. I will outline how this study will make a contribution to feminist studies, the anthropology of social movements and communities of practice, and ethnographies of student activism.

## CHAPTER TWO: VOX: THE ORGANIZATION OF STUDENT ACTIVISTS

Tonight is the first spring semester meeting of the Central University student organization named VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood. The meeting was held on the first floor of the Student Union; this location was due to the fact that the Women's Center is in the process of moving and there is not enough space for VOX to hold its meeting. Charlie (the student intern in charge of meetings and activities) was the first to arrive. She set up eight chairs surrounding two tables right in middle of the Union. The table could not be missed; there was also a large pink sign hanging on to one of the chairs that stated: ~~Reproductive Justice for All~~—plannedparenthood.org.” There was also a small sign attached that stated the organization's name: VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood. Charlie brought snacks for everyone, these included: Minute Maid pink lemonade, cups, napkins, two fruit cups, Oreo cookies, mini Reese's cups, and Hersey kisses...all of the candy was in Valentines wrappers (I am guessing they were on sale).

--Jordan, VOX member and observer, February 21, 2011

The above commentary is an excerpt from my personal journal; this meeting was the first official VOX meeting that I attended at CU. I was surprised to find that VOX had no official meeting place; the group just met wherever there were enough chairs and tables to accommodate their needs. This excerpt demonstrates how most of the VOX meetings began, with Charlie arriving first and preparing for the meeting to begin.

The aim for this chapter is to give readers an idea of how VOX operates as a student organization, as a limb of advocacy for Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), as a social movement organization, and as a community of practice. I will introduce some of the most active members of VOX; I will explore their intentions, desires, and key feminist goals as members of the VOX organization. Storytelling among VOX members is a common feature during meetings and at outreach events. In this context storytelling includes instances of shared stories and personal narratives addressing individual experiences with regards to feminist and,



most commonly, reproductive issues. I attempt to demonstrate how such storytelling activities worked to create a shared sense of community, as well as a sense of belonging among VOX members. During outreach events, members shared stories to promote VOX's social movement objectives.

### **VOX and Planned Parenthood**

VOX is a national organization that originated with the aim of mobilizing college students in support of Planned Parenthood and its family planning operations. According to Planned Parenthood's website, chapters of VOX can be found on college (and some high school) campuses in over forty states. These chapters participate in collective action by supporting their local Planned Parenthood health centers, by mobilizing advocates of reproductive rights and by educating their peers about sexual health. VOX chapters also work to inform their peers about the programs and services that are offered by their local branches of Planned Parenthood.

The Central University chapter of VOX was formed in 2005 and has participated in several events to promote pro-choice initiatives. Some of these events include forums on relevant topics, such as "Spirituality and Reproductive Freedom" and "Sex Education: Too Much or Not Enough?" Activities also include potluck dinners, movie nights and tabling sessions in public areas on campus. This VOX chapter's mission statement states:

VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood of Central University exists to educate the university community about reproductive health and rights, to translate increased awareness into pro-choice activism on campus, and to serve as a coalition partner to state, national, and international reproductive rights efforts.

VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood at Central University believes in the fundamental right of every individual to manage his or her fertility. VOX supports full access to comprehensive reproductive and complementary health care services in settings that preserve and protect the essential privacy and rights of each individual; advocates public policies that guarantee these rights and ensure access to such services; and supports access to medically accurate educational programs that enhance understanding of human sexuality.

Across the country, VOX mission statements are very similar. Most state similar goals of reproductive justice and the promotion of pro-choice initiatives. A basic feature of VOX chapters nationwide is that every chapter specifically states its alliance with Planned Parenthood.

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) plays a very active role with VOX organizations and its members. Not only does PPFA offer resources (both economic and otherwise), each VOX chapter has a Planned Parenthood representative who works directly with them. Emily, a representative of Planned Parenthood Gulf Coast (PPGC), was the designated representative for the CU VOX chapter. She frequently attends meetings and events where she not only offers her support for VOX outreach but she also reminds members about Planned Parenthood's current missions and any relevant political or social news. In addition, Emily works very closely with VOX President Charlie. As VOX President and a paid student intern for Planned Parenthood, Charlie is in charge of organizing and running VOX meetings and outreach events. Charlie asserts that she also controls ~~all~~ of the back and forth communication between our head at Planned Parenthood and the group." This information is transmitted in e-mails, Facebook messages or status updates, text messages and during VOX meetings. Charlie's intern work involves working with local clinics, organizing petitions, data entry, and making calls informing people about events and how they can get involved.

During a recent VOX meeting, Jennifer discussed the training that Planned Parenthood provides ~~on~~ political and social issues and how to handle the less than supportive members of society." Charlie expounded on the topic of training, claiming that VOX teaches its members ~~how~~ to approach talking to people...you know...adversely and positively, how to do deal with things that come along with getting your topic out there and discussing it." Emily, the PPGC representative, provides information about effective outreach methods, such as: circulating

effective petitions, providing information to the general public, writing letters and making calls to state representatives. All of these outreach methods have the main objective of promoting and protecting reproductive justice for all.

### **VOX as a Community of Practice**

For this thesis, I have adopted Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice. At first glance, I saw the CU VOX organization as more of a community of interest (Carlson 1994), where common interests gave members a voice and a sense of identity. Although VOX does offer its members a shared sense of identity, the organization also offers an opportunity for collective learning and group collaboration. Wenger (2007: 1) describes communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."

Member participation is a key method of learning and being absorbed into the "culture of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 95). As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) point out "a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages." Becoming a member of a community of practice is a transformative process; according to Lave and Wenger (1991: 122), "communities of practice have histories and developmental cycles, and reproduce themselves in such a way that the transformation of newcomers into old-timers becomes unremarkably integral into practice." Ultimately, the new member is transformed into a practitioner. Wenger (2007) describes three vital characteristics of communities of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice. I will discuss each of these categories in detail in the remaining sections of this chapter.

## The Domain: Members, Representation, and Feminist Activism

The CU chapter of VOX is a relatively small organization, with a fluctuating number of members with each member engaging in varying levels of participation. Kenneth Heller (1989: 9) outlines some features of organization membership and states that “members are not equal in their roles and responsibilities, or in the information, motivation, and resources they possess.”

This is also true for VOX; for this reason, I would like to briefly introduce some of the most active members of the student organization individuals who are referred to throughout this thesis. For the sake of time and space, I have not included more peripheral members in this introduction.

I now present some VOX members:

- **Charlie** (VOX President and student intern with Planned Parenthood): Charlie first became involved with VOX after taking a women and gender studies course that involved a learning component through Planned Parenthood. A student in her class let her know about the VOX student organization and Charlie playfully indicated “it’s all downhill from there”. Charlie was raised in a middle-class household and attended a private Catholic high school, where she received very little comprehensive sex education. She is currently acquiring a degree in secondary education with a minor in women and gender studies. Her own educational experiences have left her feeling like “our state is lagging severely in getting comprehensive sexual education to its young people and they are the ones who suffer. I feel VOX plays an active role in getting people to pay attention to sexual health and rights to ensure that we move forward as a generation instead of backwards.” Charlie has been very forthcoming with explaining what VOX has offered her as a feminist outlet “VOX has allowed me to speak openly with my peers, as well as state representatives about the amazing work Planned Parenthood does and has produced real change in our country. Making sure that my voice is heard is the biggest reward I can think of.”
- **Skylar** (VOX Vice-President): Skylar has recently graduated from CU with a degree in history and secondary education and a minor in political science. He is currently teaching English in a local high school. While attending CU, Skylar actively participated in VOX, as well as other feminist organizations on campus, specifically Women Organizing Women (WOW). During VOX outreach Skylar took a more financial approach when discussing the benefits of Planned Parenthood and contraception. He would say things

like ~~for~~ every dollar Planned Parenthood spends they save tax payers four dollars<sup>4</sup>.” Unlike some other VOX members Skylar has no problem with engaging in personal political debate or opposition; some of the other VOX members’ joke that he sometimes ~~looks~~ for confrontations.”

- **Lolita** (VOX Treasurer): Lolita is the only VOX member who I came in contact with that was raised in California. She is a practicing vegan who claims to be more spiritual than religious. Lolita worked with the CU newspaper and she is highly involved with other feminist organizations on campus as well as being a big supporter of animal rights initiatives. When speaking to students about contraception and reproductive rights she frequently reminds them that ~~it~~’s not just a woman’s issue, it’s an everyone issue.” Author, feminist and social activist, bell hooks, is one of Lolita’s most influential role model.
- **Jamie** (VOX member): Jamie first learned about VOX at a student organizational fair and he is one of VOX’s newest members. Jamie was raised in an upper-middle class, Catholic household. His educational interests are in anthropology. His main objective as a VOX member is to ~~provide~~ birth control and support Planned Parenthood.”
- **Alex** (VOX member): Alex is currently seeking a major in biology and minors in French and chemistry at Central University. She is really interested in VOX as an avenue to promote women’s health and safe sex on campus; she believes that ~~a~~ lot of the fear surrounding women’s health is borne out of ignorance. Informing people could alleviate fears and help keep women safe.” Alex was raised in an upper-middle class family and attended a high school that offered an abstinence-only sex education program. When she began college she made a serious effort to educate herself about sex education. As a member of VOX she wants ~~to~~ help dispel myths and concerns about Planned Parenthood.” When asked about the benefits of being a VOX member Alex professed ~~education~~ and lots of free condoms.”
- **Jennifer** (CU alumna and VOX member): ~~We~~ [VOX] don’t offer a glamorous title or popularity points, but we do help to empower women. In the group you can voice how you feel about issues...like personally I support a woman’s right to choose but partial birth abortions I still have trouble with...and they can be discussed.” Jennifer has decided to enter the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) nursing program which helps individuals build a case against their attacker and also offers venues for help after the incident (i.e. counseling, self-defense classes, etc.). Jennifer was acting President for VOX before she graduated; she still attends VOX events and volunteers with Planned Parenthood.

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<sup>4</sup> This figure was produced by Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 2011.

The information presented above has been collected from over 14 months of participant observation, longer recorded interviews and short, impromptu interviews. These brief introductions help to explain and present some of the main goals and interests of VOX members. Moreover, I would like to confer that the majority of VOX members were raised in middle to upper-middle class households; Fred Rose (1997: 464) notes that “membership in new social movement organizations is disproportionately upper middle class.” These introductions also demonstrate that as individuals, VOX members do hold a variety of personal views that both intersect with and diverge from PPFA’s platform<sup>5</sup>. As Robert Trotter (1999) notes individuals all reflect their values and beliefs, along with their dreams and accomplishments, through those that they choose to make acquaintances with and in those they choose to avoid. Many VOX members have similar academic goals, as well as activist goals. For many members their life experiences have transformed them into social movement activists (Duncan 1999). Each member employs their own agency when deciding to participate in VOX.

As Wenger (2007) asserts, communities of practice have an identity that is shared by the domain of interest. Wenger (2007: 1) claims that membership implies a “commitment to the domain” and a “shared competence” that distinguishes its members from non-members. From my fieldwork and interviews it has become very clear that VOX members do share a commitment to the domain of reproductive justice. Whether members decide to join because of personal experiences with abstinence-only sex education or due to other experiences that have led to the development of a feminist consciousness, such as life experiences with oppression, increased education of feminist issues or political salience (Duncan 1999:616), VOX advances a

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<sup>5</sup>I specifically want to mention Jennifer’s discomfort with partial birth abortions. PPFA’s position is that there is no such thing as partial birth abortions. I think that the imagery involved with late term abortions is what causes many people to disapprove of such abortions.

collective feminist agenda. This commitment is demonstrated by their membership in VOX, their participation in both Planned Parenthood and VOX activities, along with participation with other like-minded organizations and initiatives<sup>6</sup>. This type of collaboration “creates mechanisms for cross-fertilization and communication” (Rosenthal, Fingrutd, Ethier, Karant and McDonald 1985) which can ultimately assist all organizations involved in the collective action process. The scope of collective action, or networks of organizations, is limited to groups and organizations with similar interests and/or related concerns (Benford and Snow 2000). It’s important to note that most VOX members do negotiate multiple memberships with other activist oriented organizations.

VOX members have a particular shared knowledge on historical and current situations of reproductive rights. As discussed in the previous section, Planned Parenthood offers VOX members training on the current state of reproductive issues, both socially and politically. In general, VOX members are more informed about such issues in comparison to their non-member student counterparts. This can be seen during VOX outreach, when members are trying to inform the public about current reproductive or relevant issues; overall, the majority of the student body that VOX comes in contact with is not familiar (or informed enough) with the topics or issues that VOX is presenting. I present this generalization based on the experience of the majority of CU students who approached VOX outreach events had very little knowledge of the current legislation surrounding reproductive rights. This lack of knowledge was also evident when students asked about effective contraception use. There is so much false information about contraception use. On one occasion a female Chemistry Ph.D. student asked if colorful condoms

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<sup>6</sup> The VOX organization does try to work with other campus groups that support women’s issues and gender equity. In the past they have worked with Women Organizing Women (WOW), Women & Gender Studies Graduate Organization (WGSGO), and the Student Health Center.

were actually effective; she understood that they were not as effective as clear condoms. This is false; colorful condoms are just as effective as clear condoms. This type of interaction demonstrates a common occurrence that occurred due to misinformation about contraception's. VOX members do not call themselves "experts" on reproductive issues; however, they do recognize their collective competence and this realization contributes to their continual efforts to learn from one another.

### **The Community: Meetings, Communications and Storytelling**

In an effort to pursue their interests, VOX members participate in discussions and activities that help promote their feminist goals. A key element of communities of practice is that "members interact and learn together" (Wenger 2007: 2). VOX meetings offer a perfect space for such informative interactions. Meetings also serve the purpose of planning events around campus. The group discusses many different opportunities for campus outreach, activities that will be discussed at length in the following section.

During my observations, VOX meetings were held in the student union or in private classrooms. Each meeting lasted from approximately twenty minutes to an hour. In the course of the meeting, Charlie would debrief the group on current political opposition directed towards Planned Parenthood, the representation of Planned Parenthood in the media, and reproductive debates that related directly to the CU student body. VOX meetings are conducted very informally and discursive processes such as personal narratives and storytelling among members are a very prominent feature of these gatherings. The function of storytelling by VOX members serves several purposes, it highlights relevant issues, beliefs (Benford and Snow 2000) and it also use a method of advancing its social movement agenda (Crawley and Broad 2004). For example, VOX held a direct action tabling session where they asked students to share stories of



how they first learned about sex. These shared stories helped engage student participation and they also created a sense of community between students and VOX members (Johnstone 2001). Storytelling among VOX members is also utilized as a means of collecting and disseminating information to the larger group (Levi-Strauss 1979). Throughout meetings a variety of topics are considered. Some reoccurring issues include: parents and their fears of talking with their children about safe sex and contraception use, the short-comings of abstinence-only sex education for high school students and somehow the entertainer, Lady Gaga, made her way into the conversation more than once<sup>7</sup>.

Most VOX members attended high schools that offered abstinence-only education. There is a current law in Louisiana that makes sex education optional for each school district and the lessons are required to focus on abstinence. There is also a specific ban on discussing abortion and there is a parental opt-out policy. In May 2010, Representative Pat Smith (D-Baton Rouge) proposed House Bill 529 which would require school districts to teach comprehensive sex education as a part of the health curriculum; the House voted no with a vote of 23-67. Current Governor Bobby Jindal also opposed Smith's bill. I reason that these sex education policies are a direct result of the religious makeup of the state with 90% of its residents identifying as Christians (60% Protestant, 28% Roman Catholic, 2% other Christian), two percent as other (1% Islam, 1% Buddhism, less than 0.5% Judaism) and eight percent claiming no religious affiliation. These statistics may also explain why the majority of the state's elected officials support pro-life incentives. Governor Bobby Jindal and Senator David Vitter were rated 100% by the National Right to Life Committee which indicates a strong pro-life stance. Senator Mary Landrieu was rated 50% which indicates a mixed voting record on abortion issues. Considering this context, it

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<sup>7</sup> Lady Gaga is a popular pop singer and activist. Her work with LGBT activism, HIV/AIDs awareness and her Born this Way Foundation which focuses on youth empowerment is highly respected by the majority of VOX members.

makes sense that many CU students are uncomfortable with discussing abortion, this dynamic will be discussed in the last chapter of this thesis.

Looking back on VOX meetings, these meetings offer an open forum for members to discuss the issues presented by Charlie and also to mention items that they felt are news worthy. For example, during one meeting Skylar showed the group an article that he encountered on thinkprogress.org.<sup>8</sup> The article was titled “Anti-abortion Billboard Featuring President Obama Says ‘Every 21 Minutes, Our Next Possible Leader Is Aborted.’” VOX members were already familiar with the anti-choice<sup>9</sup> organizations, Always Life and ThatsAbortion.com, which were placing similar billboards across the country. Just a few weeks earlier, VOX had discussed the forced removal of a billboard in New York City that stated “The most dangerous place for an African American is the womb.” Members were both concerned and dismayed by this racialized imagery and the statement it was making about Planned Parenthood and their practices. Charlie didn’t really know what to say:

Um...yeah...it’s disturbing and completely false...because if you were part of the organization you would know that the people involved in it are...that’s the furthest thing away from their mindset and...but...so that’s, it’s aggravating...

PPGC representative Emily agreed and confirmed that “the attacks [against Planned Parenthood] have been fast and furious.” I have briefly mentioned Planned Parenthood’s history of eugenics in the first chapter of this thesis. I believe that this history is used by opposing groups to frame PPFA as a racist organization. These attacks are ultimately trying to hinder PPFA’s ability to function as a healthcare provider. Such discussions serve to motivate the group to continue their advocacy and also to inform them that there is still a great necessity for reproductive advocacy.

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<sup>8</sup> Think Progress is a blog that all VOX members are familiar with. This blog provides a forum for progressive thoughts and discussions.

<sup>9</sup> Anti-choice is the term used by VOX members when describing pro-life activists.

Storytelling offers VOX members a sense of a shared renewal for their cause which in turn recreates and maintains their shared sense of community and group belonging. Significantly this storytelling ranges from personal experiences that motivate student members to become activists to reports from the media world that require collective analysis and create a shared sense of what the group is up against.

### **The Practice: Outreach**

Lastly, “practice” is what separates communities of practice from other community frameworks. As Wenger (2007: 2) asserts:

Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

The main “practice” of VOX is in its student outreach during tabling sessions. A tabling session is when an organization sets up tables in a public space on campus; during these sessions, organizations have the opportunity to interact directly with students and they can also provide information on their organization or current cause.

Towards the beginning of my observations with the VOX organization, tabling sessions were focused around the Pence Bill. On January 7, 2011, Representative Mike Pence (R-Indiana) introduced the Pence Bill (aka. Title X Abortion Provider Prohibition Act) which would prohibit abortion providers from receiving federal funds through Title X. The U.S. House of Representatives had already passed the bill and the Senate was the next to vote; if this bill passed through the Senate it would completely cripple Planned Parenthood’s operations. In an effort to thwart this bill, VOX set up tabling sessions to promote awareness of the necessity of Planned Parenthood. Below is an e-mail from Charlie that states what the tabling session would offer:

Hope you are all having a great weekend. Just letting everyone know we will be tabling this Tuesday (March 1st) from 10am-2pm. If anyone is interested in helping we will be doing petitions and possibly a phone bank to call our Senators about the Pence bill. Please let me know if you would like to help, and if not you are always welcome to stop by, say hey, and show your support for Planned Parenthood!!

This e-mail demonstrates only one of the means through which Charlie communicated with the group; e-mails were more prevalent than any other form of communication.

VOX chapters have all been trained in how to represent Planned Parenthood verbally, as well as visually. VOX chapters have a very distinctive style when it comes to setting up their advocacy tables. The tables should always include pamphlets, handouts, VOX pins, and condoms (See Figure 2.1); CU VOX also included candy. CU VOX arranged their table a little differently for the tabling session that was set to focus on the Pence Bill and the necessity of Planned Parenthood. VOX hung two pictures from the table; these pictures were of a naked male and female. The female body was censored by writing covering her breasts; the writing asked “Want to keep these healthy?” The picture of the male had the censored space covering his genitals and asking a similar question “Want to keep those healthy?” Members of VOX were holding signs that read “Don’t take away my breast exams,” and “Don’t take away my cancer screenings.” Charlie reminded me that these signs were made by students and were not provided by PPFA. Planned Parenthood brochures and emergency contraception pamphlets covered the table along with a large (approximately 2 feet by 1 foot) standing poster which discussed the Pence Bill.

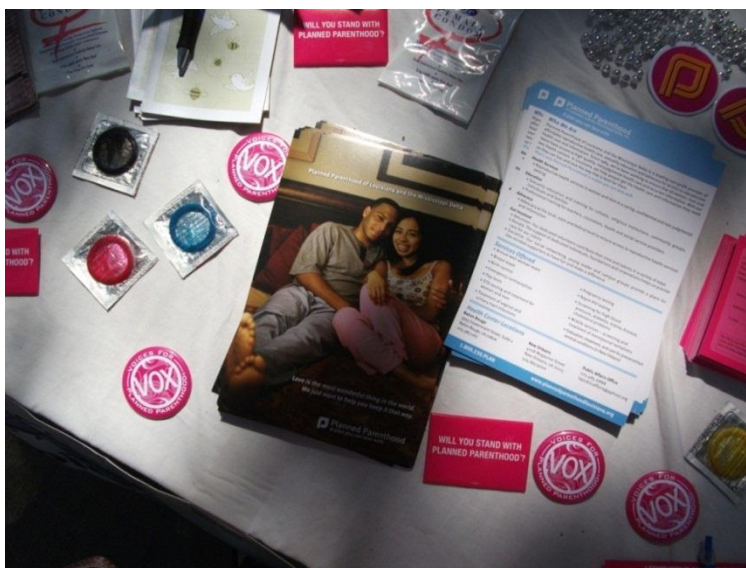


Figure 2.1. VOX: Voices for Planned Parenthood tabling session. Photograph taken by author.

In addition, there was an array of handouts and brochures that were provided for people to take. Some stated things like: “Planned Parenthood of Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta<sup>10</sup>, Inc.—A plan you can love with,” “Love is the most wonderful thing in the world. We just want to help you keep it that way.” These handouts had headings like “Who we are” which was followed by a brief mission statement:

Planned Parenthood of Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta is a leading non-profit provider of affordable reproductive health care, sexuality education and advocacy for access to reproductive health care and information. Since 1984, we’ve been working to ensure that all women, men and teens have access to high-quality, non-judgmental health care and accurate information. With our two health centers in Louisiana, we help people get health care and information they need so they can live and love the way that is best for them. —That’s why Planned Parenthood is a plan you can love with.

<sup>10</sup> This has been recently changed from the Mississippi Delta to the Gulf Coast.

The handouts also included information on the services offered by Planned Parenthood along with local health care centers (Baton Rouge and New Orleans<sup>11</sup>). Other pamphlets (see Figure 2.2) that were placed on the table included: “Human Sexuality: What Children Need to Know and When They Need to Know It,” “Your Contraceptive Choices,” “HIV and AIDS<sup>12</sup>,” and lastly applications for “Take Charge: Family Planning Waiver Services for Louisiana Women<sup>13</sup>.”



Figure 2.2. Examples of pamphlets and handouts distributed by VOX.

VOX members were also passing out pink slips of paper that also had the logo “stand with Planned Parenthood” on the left side and this writing followed on the right side:

**Senator Mary Landrieu:**

DC Office: 202-224-5824 or Baton Rouge: 225-389-0395

**Senator David Vitter:**

DC Office: 202-224-4623 or Baton Rouge: 225-383-0331

**Please call your Senators with the following message:**

<sup>11</sup> These are the only two Planned Parenthood clinics in the state of Louisiana—both are in the portion of the State.

<sup>12</sup> All three of these pamphlets were produced by Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

<sup>13</sup> This application was produced by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.

We ask you to oppose anything that will defund or limit Planned Parenthood's ability to provide health care to the 3 million patients that rely on Planned Parenthood for health care services. We also ask you make clear to leadership that you will not vote for any bill that includes these harmful cuts.

Some people signed the petition without reading anything, some would take a pamphlet and others showed no interest in being involved in anything that VOX members were saying. For instance, most students that signed VOX petitions were very supportive to the causes presented, however, the majority didn't want to be contacted by PPFA or by CU VOX. Some students were amazed by their ability to impose change; one kinesiology freshmen even commented ~~my~~ "signature is that powerful?" Other CU students avoided the VOX tables altogether.

All of the training, planning, and storytelling that occurs during VOX meetings assist members during tabling sessions and other methods of outreach. During one table session an exchange occurred between a female student and Skylar that really tested VOX training methods. The female student stopped by the tabling session and began to read the poster which presented the Pence Bill agenda, and after she finished reading she stated that she did not feel comfortable signing the petition. Immediately, Skylar asked ~~What~~ "What don't you agree with?" She stated that she did not believe some of the information that was provided and that she felt health care was a privilege and not a right that tax payers should pay for. Skylar then questioned ~~well~~ "well what facts don't you believe?" The student pointed to the poster to a statement that read, ~~More~~ "More than an estimated 18,000 pregnancies were averted through the use of contraception last year alone." She continued ~~I~~ "I just don't believe that." Skylar, who was no longer concealing his anger, shouted ~~What~~ "What is there not to believe, it's a fact! And..." VOX training stressed the importance of staying calm and not engaging in heated debates. VOX's job is to present the student body with accurate information. Seeing how offended the woman was and how detrimental this interaction could have been to the VOX organization and its main goal, I stepped in and said ~~Thank~~ "Thank you so

much for taking the time and effort to read the information we provided, if it is not a cause that you feel comfortable supporting we completely understand...thank for your time.” The student smiled and hesitantly said “Thanks” and walked away. This interaction clearly demonstrates how easily an exchange can become heated; I believe that Skylar’s actions in this situation did reflect badly on the organization. VOX members discussed this exchange at meetings and agreed that similar interactions should be avoided.

VOX outreach also includes the recruitment of new members. Tabling sessions can also be employed for the purposes of recruitment. Students can sign up for group e-mails to learn more about the organization. Another form of recruitment includes going into classrooms and informing students about VOX and what the organization has to offer. Every semester there is a student organization fair where all of the student organizations that CU has to offer can advertise and recruit members. Most of the VOX members would agree that word of mouth is the most effective recruitment tool. Jennifer notes that VOX is ~~not~~ extremely aggressive on recruiting but we have a core of dedicated people. We also feel that people want to take action but are afraid of how they will appear to their peers.” This sentiment is shared by the majority of the group and is also reinforced during tabling sessions when individuals show support for VOX’s cause but do not want any further information on the VOX group. Most VOX members agree that this response is probably due to students’ reluctance to get involved with the VOX group specifically, however, they recognize that it may also be because many students are overextended due to class and work schedules.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has established that VOX works collaboratively with Planned Parenthood as a branch of advocacy. It also demonstrates how Planned Parenthood provides training and



support to members of individual VOX chapters. In addition, I have examined some of the features of VOX as a social movement organization and outlined what functions the organization serves for its members. VOX is more than just a social channel of common interests; it is a community of practice that works towards collective learning and problem solving with regards to reproductive advocacy. VOX members have a range of desires and intentions and they all look to VOX as an outlet for their feminist goals. As a community of practice, VOX offers a place where people with a certain set of interests and goals can come together and interact as a member of a common social community. From these long-term interactions members are able to enact and accomplish the specific objectives that they initially set out to achieve. I have presented VOX's domain, community, and practice in this chapter and I will continue to expound on this framework in the following chapters.

The following chapter will look more specifically at a university campus and how activist's use campus space that is deemed "public space." For this chapter, I intend to examine the use of public space by social movements, both historically and currently. Furthermore, I will investigate how campus space relates to the greater public sphere.

## CHAPTER THREE: FREE SPEECH ALLEY: A STUDENT FORUM

AND SO—the Alley. Very much an institution at LSU, with students sitting, standing and reclining to listen and participate in debate that is often scrappy may be unusual and a shade off-color, but is rarely boring.

--Candace F. Lee, *Baton Rouge State Times*, June 24, 1971

Louisiana State University's campus has many intriguing historical sites. One of the major sites that has had a controversial presence on campus is LSU's Free Speech Alley (FSA). Since its founding in November 1964, there have been numerous debates surrounding the student soapbox. Significantly, some of the same debates that were present 48 years ago are still being voiced today. This chapter looks at some of the historical and contemporary conversations surrounding the public space of Free Speech Alley. By analyzing these exchanges I hope to gain a greater understanding of public space and how social movements represent themselves using that space, specifically examining how, following Henri Lefebvre (1991) Free Speech Alley functions as a space for representation. There are several universities and colleges in Louisiana that have active VOX chapters; Louisiana State University is no exception. For this chapter, I will continue to approach the VOX organization as a social movement organization and I will investigate how this organization navigates within the context of Free Speech Alley.

The methodology for this project includes archival research, participant observations, interviews and spot observation. Archival research will be presented to examine the history of social movements on LSU's campus and I will explore how, or if, the founding of Free Speech Alley has effected social movements' effectiveness on campus. The units of analysis are individuals who are present on campus; this could include campus visitors and faculty members,

however, I intend for the major focus to be on current and past students. I recognize that there are many multidimensional variables which could affect this research. Age, gender, ethnicity, race, economic status and religious background are just a few of the many variables that have an impact on how individuals interpret the activities of Free Speech Alley.

### **Brief History of Free Speech Alley**

The official founding of Louisiana State University's Free Speech Alley coincided with the opening of the LSU Union building in November of 1964. Former Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs, James Reddoch, discussed Free Speech Alley in his oral history interview in 1993 and he recalled that students gathered as early as the late fifties. Group gatherings stalled during the construction of the Union and returned at the completion of the Union project. Students traditionally gathered on their own accord, until the LSU Union's Current Events Committee's instated a "Free Speech" project<sup>14</sup>. According to the October 11, 1964 *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate* the committee set aside a designated "Free Speech Area" where each Monday between 12:30 and 2:00 p.m., LSU students, faculty and staff members were allowed to mount one of three platforms to give informal speeches of their choosing. The aim of this project was to foster "informal spontaneous interchange between speaker and audience." This "Free Speech" experiment was inspired by other campuses in the country that had similar campus forums. When reading through some of the archives about the founding of Free Speech Alley, I noticed a pattern of the University implementing control over the student forum; I argue below that the University participated in forms of censorship in the interest of keeping the University respectable.

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<sup>14</sup> Associate Professor of Speech, Dr. Owens Peterson, assisted the Current Event's Committee with plans for the "Free Speech" project.

Free Speech Alley experienced an enthusiastic beginning with three to five hundred students gathering to hear speakers discuss a variety of topics including: school administration, politics, coeds on campus, racial desegregation, and religion. Figure 3.1 demonstrates how Free Speech Alley sessions were conducted and it also shows how the audience positioned itself in relation to the soapbox. Shortly after the commencement of the forum, interest seemed to die down with only about one hundred students attending the two-hour session (*The Daily Reveille*, February 16, 1965). This flickering of interest caused students to seek outside speakers, meaning speakers who had no affiliation with LSU. The issue of “appropriate” or “legitimate” outside speakers caused much debate in FSA sessions. Questions of what constituted free speech and which speakers should be banned, if any, revived FSA activities.

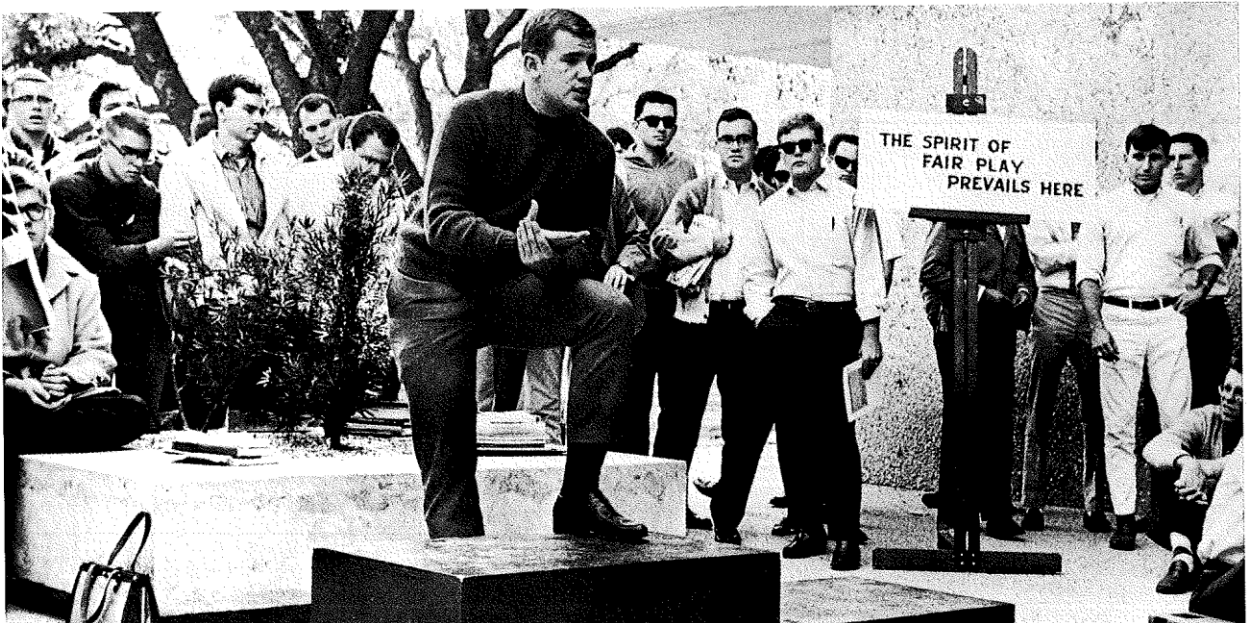


Figure 3.1. Example of a Free Speech Alley session in the fall semester of 1966. *Gumbo*, 1966.

Such debates prompted Paul Womack, student chairman of the Current Event’s Committee, to issue a document that clearly stated the rules and regulations of FSA. I have included this list which was circulated in late-April 1965. This information was retrieved from the archives in the

Hill Memorial Library at LSU in the Student Government Association Records. The document clearly states the intentions and purpose of Free Speech Alley:

Free Speech Alley is a program designed to provide an opportunity for individual LSU Students, Faculty and Staff to express their opinions on subjects affecting them as citizens and members of the campus community in an atmosphere of fair play and exchange of ideas. Free Speech Alley is a forum for individuals, created to fill the individual's need for a means to publicly express his views; it is not designed as another channel of promotion for organized groups.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the purposes of FSA have unmistakably changed since its establishment. Today, if you visit FSA, organized groups compose the vast majority of the alley. However, those organized groups do express their opinions and the ~~atmosphere of fair play~~" is still upheld<sup>15</sup>.

Only two rules were cited for Free Speech Alley: 1) Participation in FSA is limited to students, faculty and staff of LSU and 2) Comments, criticism, and questions of the speakers are encouraged, but a sense of fair play shall prevail. The alley moderator, a member of the Current Event's Committee, was provided some guidelines in order to assist the proceedings of the Alley. These guidelines as presented here:

- 1) An opening and closing statement should be made at the beginning and end of the prescribed time of FSA. It should be simply along the lines of ~~FSA is now open~~; if you have any comments, please step to the box."
- 2) Participants should be requested to use the soapbox while making statements.
- 3) Organized groups should not be allowed to dominate the alley.
- 4) Obscenity, cursing or other indecencies should not be tolerated. An occasional ~~hell~~" or ~~damn~~" for emphasis may be overlooked, but the moderator is responsible for maintaining an academic-like atmosphere worthy of a university. Should language go beyond the decent, the moderator will attempt to bring it into line by questioning the need

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<sup>15</sup> I have had to assume what it meant by ~~fair play~~" and I have included the complete list of rules and regulations that were present in the archival record for FSA. I assume these rules ensure that fair play is upheld.

for such language and appealing to the alley crowd for support in limiting such language. If this fails, the moderator should remove the soapboxes for the day<sup>16</sup>.

- 5) The soapboxes must be surrendered at a closing time designed by the Current Events Committee (currently 2:30 p.m.) unless the moderator determines that he will stay with the program and keep it open longer.
- 6) At closing time the moderator should aim to disband the crowd rather than encourage it to remain. Should it look as though there could be trouble of some kind, he should seek to calm the situation before closing the alley.

Unfortunately, there is no public list of current rules and regulations for FSA to directly compare. However, the LSU Campus Life office informed me that getting permission to utilize FSA is a very complex process. An alley moderator is still present, and the moderator occasionally checks to ensure that no one is occupying FSA who has not received permission. FSA is still designated for student, faculty and staff use; however, outside political and religious organizations are protected by the First Amendment and cannot be asked to leave<sup>17</sup>.

Opinions on the purpose and effectiveness of FSA as an open forum are varied. Former Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs, James Reddoch, when asked about Free Speech Alley in his oral history interview in 1993 stated “I personally think that Free Speech Alley has been a wonderful approach to giving students and others the opportunity to make known their position on things;” and “I think, by and large Free Speech Alley served a good purpose. It was conducted in a reasonable way under most circumstances” (Tape 344, Side A). Historically, many students have referred to the forum as a place for free expression of opinion, while others referred to it as a form of anarchy. “Menaces Alley” and “Hate Speech Alley” were used in 1967 to describe the space and those names are still used by students today. LSU student, Ed White,

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<sup>16</sup> “Fair play” by university standards seems to suggest censorship in the interest of keeping the University respectable. I will discuss some instances where issues that dealt with sexuality and reproductive health were not seen as appropriate topics.

<sup>17</sup> That is as long as they are not disrupting campus activities or that they are not being verbally abusive to students. Many students that I spoke with commented that certain religious groups are, indeed, both disruptive and verbally abusive; however, these groups are still allowed to utilize FSA.

wrote an editorial piece to *The Daily Reveille*, printed on December 21, 1966 which stated “The Alley can and should be something more than a three-ring circus or a place to be verbally bushwhacked.” Today, a student blog called “You Know You Go to LSU When...” includes funny anecdotes about campus life and on January 26, 2012 the blogger posted “you know you go to LSU when...you’ve been told that you’re going to hell at least once a week.” This reference is directed towards the religious organizations that frequently occupy the space in FSA. Some of the conversations that have surrounded FSA in its infancy are still present in lively discussions among current LSU students, faculty and staff.

### **Contemporary Usage**

Today, visitors to LSU’s campus would see a very different Free Speech Alley from the one conceived and instituted in 1964. The platforms (soapboxes) have been removed and the space that was once reserved for individual speakers is now utilized by student organizations. FSA, which began as a space that was “not designed as another channel of promotion for organized groups,” is now a space mainly reserved for use by organized groups (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). My archival research has not revealed when this change from an open forum to a venue for organizations occurred<sup>18</sup>.

Every spring semester, campaigns for student government offices overtake the alley. There are some core groups or individuals that inhabit FSA almost every day. Organizations that frequent the space include: VOX, SPECTRUM,<sup>19</sup> Feminism in Action,<sup>20</sup> Believers at LSU<sup>21</sup>, and

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<sup>18</sup> From my analysis, I can only conclude that this change was ultimately due to inactivity and boredom with FSA discussions. FSA was highly documented during its infancy; however, just a few years later the local and school newspapers no longer featured stories on FSA happenings.

<sup>19</sup> SPECTRUM is an “activist and support oriented group for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning students and their supporters of the LSU campus community.”

the pro-life (~~anti-choice~~) organization LSU Students for Life. Finally, at the far end of the alley closest to the union steps is a white haired gentleman in a white T-shirt that reads ~~Jesus Talk~~.<sup>20</sup> He is a key member of FSA community and can be seen in the alley Monday through Friday.

On more eventful days, the Consuming Fire Fellowship gracefully negotiates Free Speech Alley. According to *The Daily Reveille*, Pastor Britt Williams and his Consuming Fire Fellowship have been a present force in FSA since the late 1980s. Every individual that I spoke with about Free Speech Alley had something to say about this religious group. The group occupies the northwestern portion of FSA and its members yell after students such phrases as ~~Repent!...Repent!~~ and ~~Fornicators repent!~~ Occasionally banter between students and members of the Fellowship takes place and students often videotape such interactions for the purposes of personal memory or to post them on YouTube. A recent trend has emerged with a small group of students that hold signs stating ~~Free Hugs~~ and they stand directly across from the Fellowship. One female in the ~~Free Hugs~~ group professed ~~it's an interactive tradition, making fun of the crazy people~~.<sup>21</sup> FSA offers a unique opportunity to examine the use public space in the context of college campus.

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<sup>20</sup> This group is an active advocate branch of LSU's Women Organizing Women (WOW) organization.

<sup>21</sup> This is an organization that offers outlets for Christian fellowship.





Figure 3.2. Snapshot of Free Speech Alley during an active tabling session. Photograph taken by author.



Figure 3.3. Side view of Free Speech Alley. Photograph taken by author.

## Why the Alley?

To begin, one cannot discuss the public sphere without mentioning German theorist Jürgen Habermas and his groundbreaking work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category* (1962).<sup>22</sup> Many intellectuals from a variety of backgrounds have discussed, utilized, and critiqued Habermas's theory (Baker 1992; Benhabib 1992; Calhoun 1992; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Garnham 1992; Ryan 1992; McCarthy 1992; Mitchell 1995; Crossley 2004; and McLaughlin 2004). Fraser (1992: 112) highlights some of the main themes of Habermas' 1962 work, "According to Habermas, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' or 'common interest.'" Essentially, Habermas (1989) asserts that the importance of the public sphere lies in its ability to promote societal integration and the effectiveness of that public sphere is dependent on both the quality of discourse and quantity of participation. In other words, in the context of the bourgeois society public that Habermas examined, the functionality of the public sphere depended on "a relationship between property and education that excluded the great majority of the population from effective participation in it" (Baker 1992: 186). However, Habermas presents a singular public sphere and has claimed a distinction between the public and private spheres. This dichotomy ignores the possibility that private concerns can and should be matters of "public concern." Later in this chapter, with the help of Seyla Benhabib (1992), Nancy Fraser (1992), and Mary Ryan (1992), I will approach this feature of Habermas's model with a feminist critique of the public/private binary.

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<sup>22</sup> Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was originally printed in German in 1962; it was later printed in English in 1989.

For the moment, I would like to explore Free Speech Alley and its purpose as a public space. According to Setha Low (2002: 396), public spaces have the ~~the~~ potential to be places of learning and democratic practice.” However, many public spaces contain spatial and social arrangements that are put in place to exclude certain populations (Mitchell 1995; Low 2002 and 2011; and Sheehan 2012). In other words, public spaces are designed for certain ~~appropriate~~ activities” and are to be enjoyed by an ~~appropriate~~ public” (Mitchell 1995).

As a public space, Free Speech Alley is no exception. At its origins, FSA was a space designated for a specific public: LSU students, faculty and staff members. Furthermore, appropriate activities are designated: Free Speech Alley is a forum for individuals, created to fill the individual’s need for a means to publicly express his views; it is not designed as another channel of promotion for organized groups. The rules and regulations for FSA were clearly communicated and maintained. The crowd even controlled itself, with a creed that students limit speeches to 10-minutes and crowd approval also helped to moderate speakers (*Baton Rouge State Times*, January 24, 1971). FSA functioned smoothly, providing that the ~~legitimate~~ public” (Mitchell 1995: 114) operated within the range of defined ~~appropriate~~ activities. However, when those boundaries were crossed and ~~fair play~~” was not upheld, there were consequences. For instance, when speakers discussed topics that were considered to be crude the alley moderator would intercede and decide if the forum should be closed for that day.

Problems with obscenities during FSA sessions dominated conversations during the spring semester of 1967. Specifically on February 14, 1967, LSU student, Vic Adams, jostled the audience by asking how many in the crowd had achieved climax. Later in the session he went even further during a discussion on sending women to Vietnam. *The Daily Reveille* stated that Adams suggested that women would help with the ~~rest and relaxation~~” of American troops. He

added that “mothers don’t like their sons to be associated with extramarital sex...it’s all right for their sons to kill, but extramarital sex will keep them out of heaven.” During this session the alley moderator informed Adams that he didn’t approve of the tone of the discussion. Alley moderator, Brad Lewis, stated “I told them to stop, but because the comments were made near the end of the session I thought it would all die down” (*The Daily Reveille*, February 15, 1967).

This incident prompted Union Director, Carl Maddox, to release this statement:

I recognize that language which offends one person may be acceptable to another, but any language which offends a substantial minority has no place in the Alley. Free Speech Alley should encourage articulate speech in the pursuit of ideas; allowing a participant to resort to profane or a lewd utterance is not congruous with the avowed purposes of the program. The programming group must uphold their basic regulations; I believe they will (*The Daily Reveille*, February 15, 1967).

Many students seemed to agree; a senior in the Arts and Sciences Department declared that “it must be remembered that there is a difference between Free Speech and Cheap Talk” (*The Daily Reveille*, February 24, 1967). The alley moderator felt as though Adams was just trying to challenge the rule against obscenity; moreover, Lewis stated that “some people think Free Speech Alley is a tradition at LSU, but it can be closed down by the committee at any time” (*The Daily Reveille*, February 15, 1967). A similar response occurred following stories dealing with contraception availability in the LSU infirmary.

Some controversies didn’t involve the content of FSA, such as one incident that occurred when LSU Campus Police attempted to move the space utilized as FSA from LSU Union steps to a new location (*Baton Rouge State Times*, March 16, 1971). According to Union policy, groups are prohibited from congregating in the space in front of the Union steps; large gatherings obstruct traffic and pose a violation of fire codes. The *Baton Rouge State Times* cited that a shouting match began between police and “Alley Heckler” Gary Corbin which resulted in

Corbin's arrest; students subsequently marched to the police station carrying the alley podium in a sign of support. In exploring this issue it is apparent that many students disapproved of the changing of space because they viewed it as just another constraint or parameter which directed their activities. Some students claimed that FSA only created an "illusion of democracy" (*Baton Rouge State Times*, January 24, 1971) with topics, language and space being determined by the university<sup>23</sup>.

I argue here that such restrictions and regulations of FSA function to shape FSA more as a "semi-public space." Clairy Palyvou (2004: 209) surveyed Minoan architecture and used the term urban semi-public to describe a place that was "meant for public use \_under conditions", as opposed to unrestricted use." FSA offers some characteristics of public space (e.g. a space for learning, democratic processes, and representation); however, the space is ultimately controlled by the university. The university decides which public, which ideas and which activities are legitimate. This semi-public feature of FSA does not hinder a social movement's ability to employ the space for their cause. FSA actually offers a venue for social movements to represent themselves to the larger campus community (Mitchell 1995). I will now address how social movements have utilized the space of FSA.

### **Social Movements Use of FSA**

For this analysis, I have decided to focus on women's social movements at LSU. FSA offered a venue for women to introduce their agendas into wider discourse (Rosenthal, Fingrutd, Ethier, Karant and McDonald 1985). However, before I dive into social movements in FSA I

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<sup>23</sup> Carl Maddox believed that some structures were necessary to help the flow of university activities and students should comply with regulations (*The Daily Reveille*, February 15, 1967). In other words, FSA sessions should take place without disrupting classes and the ultimate goals of academia.

would like to briefly examine how social movements negotiated LSU's campus before the creation of FSA.

In 1904, Olivia B. Davis became the first woman to be admitted to LSU<sup>24</sup>. By 1915, the university established the Department of Home Economics especially for its female students. Ten years later the first women's dorm was opened. Women on LSU's campus followed strict rules dealing with "appropriate coed behavior." The Dean of Women helped supervise and maintain women's well-being on campus; in addition, if female students had any concerns with any rules or happenings on campus they were able to appeal their interests to the Dean of Women.

There were also other venues for female students to have their voices heard. On March 10, 1926 coeds (female students) passed a resolution calling for a coed representative to have a seat on the student council in order to offer coeds greater representation. That same year coeds formed a committee that opposed the campus segregation of men and women. This committee of coeds sent a petition to the state legislature; the petition began with the following statement:

We, the women students of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical college, many of us over 21 years of age, respectfully petition the Louisiana state legislature to enact measures providing for the maintenance of the greater state university, which is adequate for the needs of both men and women students, except for the lack of dormitories for women, we request that women students be allowed to participate in the privilege of using this magnificent place.<sup>25</sup>

These are two great examples of how women on campus made themselves visible before the founding of FSA. After the formation of FSA, coeds still utilized the Dean of Women and their

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<sup>24</sup> In 1860 the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy opened with five professors and 19 cadets. The official title of The Louisiana State University was changed in 1870.

<sup>25</sup> A copy of the contents of this petition can be found in the Hill Memorial Library, under the series named Women at LSU.

school and state legislatures. However, FSA gave them the ability to interact directly with the wider LSU student body and faculty. In addition, FSA made women even more visible on campus.

There were several Free Speech Alley sessions that focused explicitly on ~~women's~~ issues. The *Baton Rouge State Times* featured an article entitled ~~The Student's Soapbox at LSU~~ on January 24, 1971 specifically mentions coeds' use of FSA, stating:

The Alley was effectively utilized last year by coeds in a big push for ~~women's rights~~—liberalized living rules for women students. The handful of women who stepped on the soapbox might indeed take credit for sparking modification of rules which came months later, not without much controversy.

During this FSA session students were fighting against a visitation rule that stated that women were not allowed to visit men's apartments. Two students Millard Gullede and Jim Koppel attacked the rule, and according to *The Daily Reveille* (March 12, 1968) Koppel claimed ~~that~~ through these rulings the University is in fact attempting to rule out sex on the campus. Rather than accomplishing this, Koppel felt that they were only advocating homosexuality and masturbation. This open forum is one instance in which women utilized the designated space of FSA to appeal to the senses of students and faculty. The Dean of Women, Margaret Jameson, authorized several changes to coed regulations about one month after the FSA forum. There is no record of Dean Jameson confirming that the FSA discussion had any effect on her discussions to loosen coed regulations. However, I assert here that the forum offered an opportunity for the ~~legitimation of new voices~~ (Calhoun 1992: 37) which assisted in the validation of their concerns. After this success, women's rights became a common topic during FSA.

If I could jump back a few years, I would like to discuss one of the most notable FSA sessions which took place in late-October of 1966. On October 18, 1966, *The Daily Reveille*

reported that doctors at the University Health Center were prescribing birth control pills to students for purposes of preventing pregnancy rather than to alleviate “female problems” which was against current university policy at that time. Female students were not allowed to receive birth control without being married or having parental permission until they were emancipated at twenty-one. Dean Jameson discussed the “birth control scandal” during her oral history in 1993:

Well my stand was that the health service decided that that’s what they should do and that within the regulations it should be carried out. I had no stand on it one way or the other. I thought that was a medical problem, any more than I would have dictated to them about what you did about measles or something or that sort. I really wasn’t in on the decision that made that...you know, decided any more than we would have been in on any other regulation (Tape 462, Side A).

Dean Jameson continued by discussing that pregnant students were not allowed to live in dormitories on campus and she recollects that —.they [pregnant students] did not stay in school. They weren’t suspended. They probably just left.” This account demonstrates how the university handled such unfavorable situations as students getting pregnant; in other words, pregnant women were no longer considered to be legitimate members of the student body. The dean’s suggestion that students “just left” suggests that informal social control mechanisms ensured that such women understood they were supposed to leave the university in their condition. Of course, it is also possible that administrative pressure was placed on these women, even if later denied.

The birth control issue was discussed at FSA; in addition, a three-hour open forum was conducted in the LSU Union Cotillion Ballroom. This forum allowed students and panelists to discuss the pros and cons of having a student health center prescribe birth control to those who requested it for various reasons. All of the publicity surrounding birth control caused a wonderful discourse among students. Previously, this was perhaps a subject that was delegated to the



private sphere and because of this “scandal” the issue was able to enter the public sphere where it could be recognized as a common concern affecting many LSU students.

### **VOX: Private to Public**

Finally, now that I have established how larger social movements, such as the women’s rights movement, engaged Free Speech Alley, I will now focus on the public/private binary presented by Habermas. Seyla Benhabib (1992), Nancy Fraser (1992) and Mary Ryan (1992) have all contributed to the feminist critique of the public/private distinction and I will utilize their works to help frame this section.

There are several key features that relate to Western understandings of the “private sphere.” The private sphere is understood as the domain of moral and religious conscience, domain of economic liberties, and, finally, the intimate sphere (Benhabib 1992: 91). This final intimate sphere is typically considered the territory of women. In addition, the term public sphere generally is understood to refer to anything outside of the domestic or familial sphere (Fraser 1992: 110). This distinction effectively excluded women from the official public sphere. Benhabib (1992: 89-90) considers that such private/public binaries have “served to confine women and typically female spheres of activity like housework, reproduction; nurture and care for the young, the sick and the elderly to the “private” domain.” Ryan (1992: 259) agrees that “gendered limits on participation in the public sphere” caused women to be relegated into the separate private realm where public discourses were not validated.

As I mentioned earlier, Habermas is critiqued for presenting a singular, official public sphere and for failing to examine competing public spheres (Fraser 1992: 115). According to Seyla Benhabib (1992: 87):

The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms. Democratization in contemporary societies can be viewed as the increase and growth of autonomous public spheres among participants.

In other words, some scholars believe that there exists multiple public spheres (Baker 1992; Benhabib 1992; Eley 1992; Garnham 1992; and Fraser 1992) and argue for the inclusion of national or transnational public spheres (McLaughlin 2004). Furthermore, if we give merit to the notion that there exist multiple public spheres than it should also follow that there are alternative methods in engaging those public spheres. For instance, Mary Ryan (1992) examines how women were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere; however, she notes that women found alternative routes to engage in public spheres. Fraser (1992:115) summarizes some of Ryan's main arguments for alternative routes of engagement:

In the case of elite bourgeois women, this involved building a counter civil society of alternative, woman-only, voluntary associations, including philanthropic and moral-reform societies. In some respects, these associations aped the all-male societies built by these women's fathers and grandfathers, yet in other respects the women were innovating, *since they creatively used the heretofore quintessentially "private" idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as springboards for public activity* [emphasis mine]. Meanwhile, for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working-class protest activities. Still other women found public outlets in street protests and parades.

Ryan's work offers a wonderful example of how excluded populations create alternative pathways for participation in public engagement. It also demonstrates how individuals and groups are capable of employing their own agency in matters that concern the public sphere. Actors are capable of employing their own agency and deciding to act on or against certain structures (Giddens 1979). In this case, women found ways of accessing public spaces through a

variety of strategies (agency) that effectively circumvented the structures that propped up men's monopoly of public discourse and, ultimately, effective political action.

VOX and its members practice their own agency when they decide to bring subject matter that is generally considered "private" into the sphere of public discourse<sup>26</sup>. As an organization, VOX's intentions revolve around presenting issues that relate to the intimate sphere, specifically, issues of intimacy, sex education, reproduction and family planning. Think back to Chapter 2, where I discussed the imagery included in CU VOX tabling sessions. These sessions embrace some very intimate images, such as condoms, pictures of half-nude men and women and brochures on every type of contraception under the sun. This act of bringing the private into the public has its after-effects. One major feature I would like to explore in depth is the cross-sex interactions that occur during CU VOX outreach. The last substantive chapter of this thesis will look specifically at these sorts of interactions and how public discourses also play a role in those interactions.

## **Conclusions**

In sum, this chapter has performed the purpose of introducing theories dealing with the public sphere and public space within the context of a college campus. I have presented data on social movements and social movement organizations use of FSA and have claimed that FSA serves as a venue which helps validate various concerns and issues. Using the University's VOX chapter as a model, I have attempted to critique the private/public binary inherent in Habermas's initial theories of the public sphere. I suggest that such a dichotomy should be avoided in order to enhance the functionality of the public sphere as a truly democratic space.

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<sup>26</sup> Nella van Dyke (1998) discusses how a history of activism can actually influence the continued emergence of student activism. In addition, a campus which has a history of social movement activism will likely experience activist activity surrounding a variety of issues on campus.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ENCOUNTERING RESISTANCE IN A FEMINIST STUDENT ORGANIZATION

A group of three students (two female, one male) passed by our tabling session...one of the girls nudged the other female and said “Here’s the table for you!” while she laughed and pointed towards our condom covered table. Her two friends, both seemingly uncomfortable with the comment quietly said “No, no thanks” and briskly walked away from the table. Charlie, Lolita and I discussed this interaction after the students had walked away...why were the students so uncomfortable at the sight of condoms? Or were they uncomfortable because of something else? Charlie concluded “We’re putting sex out there...people know they should use condoms but bringing it in front of them open to the public makes people feel really awkward.” Lolita added “It’s so taboo. People don’t like to talk about sex.”

--Jordan, excerpt from field notes, March 24, 2011

This tabling session excerpt offers some great insights on student reactions to CU VOX’s outreach efforts and how VOX members understand such audience effects. Some individuals try to challenge the message that VOX is attempting to spread, however, others are extremely supportive and excited by VOX’s presence on campus. Many exchanges between CU VOX members and students occur as cross-sex interactions. The above example also demonstrates how VOX brings traditional private issues into a very public context, this dynamic will be discussed at greater length in the following sections. This chapter will examine how popular public discourses of gender and cross-sex interactions may affect student reactions. I assert that a great deal of student resistance occurs because of cross-sex misunderstandings of what constitutes appropriate gendered language use. The main themes in this chapter are the discursive processes that surround the notions of motherhood, abortion, and sexuality. I will attempt to deconstruct how public discourses on CU’s campus reinforce or dispel gender stereotypes. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) examine the interaction of gender and language and how gender can be a determinant of social address, which can also result in linguistic variation and change. They note that “language enters into social practices that gender people and their

activities and ideas in many different ways” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). Using a cross-sex approach, I bring a new perspective to the study how “appropriate” gender norms are socially constructed and how they are displayed on a college campus. By concentrating on language use surrounding topics such as motherhood, abortion, and sexuality, I argue that gendered stereotypes are reproduced in diverse ways and that males and females do seem to employ different norms of interactions when approaching motherhood, abortion, and sexuality.

When analyzing the collected data, I focused on interactions that occurred between VOX members and other students. These conversational exchanges reveal common interpretations of gender difference and gender identities. My analysis suggests that there are several different features that may influence VOX-student interactions. First, it’s important to note that during tabling sessions the majority of VOX members are female; there are two male members, however, they cannot be present for all of the tabling sessions. Next, the VOX organization holds the power when deciding what topics are going to be presented to the campus community during their outreach. As mentioned in the previous chapter, VOX tends to discuss concerns that are traditionally considered to occupy the private sphere in the United States. There are so many interactions that I could investigate for this thesis, however, I have chosen to focus mainly on problematic interactions and deliberate over why tensions arise. These problematic interactions help demonstrate why VOX occasionally modifies its collective action frames in attempts to appeal to a larger audience.

### **Forms of Resistance**

CU VOX members experience varying degrees of resistance during their outreach. Many individuals avoid all contact with the group, some begin to initiate an exchange and then briskly walk away, others make snide comments when passing the table, while others try to initiate

debates with VOX members. From observing and analyzing all of these diverse interactions which occurred during tabling sessions, I will try to demonstrate that much of the resistance that VOX members encounter derives from cultural constructions of gender appropriate behavior and political tensions surrounding free or reduced-cost healthcare. On several occasions, interactions have occurred that support the conclusion that the political climate surrounding healthcare affected students perceptions of VOX's agenda. This data was obtained during eight different tabling sessions which cover over a years' worth of time. As a participant in these tabling sessions I took part in numerous verbal encounters which I promptly jotted down in field notes, to be expanded on later. I explore the general interactions that have occurred during each session; in addition, I note any important political or social issues that may be relevant to the temporal frame of the interactions.

First, I will briefly examine the resistance that stems from tensions surrounding free or reduced-cost healthcare. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the United State has been negotiating its way through a very interesting period, both politically and socially. The U.S. has experienced its worst domestic attack since Pearl Harbor, the subsequent Wars on Terror, digital revolutions, the election of the U.S.'s first black President, the legalization (in some states), of same-sex marriage and adoption, a catastrophic banking and fiscal crisis, national budget cuts, national healthcare (so called "Obama-care") debates<sup>27</sup>, and economic recession along with ever increasing percentages of unemployment and personal indebtedness. In response to these developments, and faced with media focus on economic stress, budget cuts, and the possibility of increased taxes, some students are becoming more critical of public funding for social programs

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<sup>27</sup> "Obama-care" (formally, "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act") is a law that was passed to in efforts to make health available and affordable for all, including those with pre-existing medical conditions. For several reasons, national support for Obama-care has been consistently low, many citizens' fear it will led to further deficits and too much governmental control.

and health provider organizations. Many passing students made comments on VOX's tabling sessions stating things like: "I don't support free healthcare," "Healthcare is a privilege, not a right," and "People shouldn't have sex if they can't afford to have a baby." One sorority member even went so far to say "I don't need Planned Parenthood; both of my parents have jobs."

The most common utterance that I documented was from female students asserting that they didn't need Planned Parenthood. This sentiment was expressed on average two to three times during each tabling session. VOX members felt that these individuals were missing the bigger picture. The informative tabling sessions were not solely to promote Planned Parenthood; they were aimed at trying to educate individuals about taking efforts to protect their reproductive rights. Most CU students probably don't know that at least 48 percent of women living in the United States will experience an unintentional pregnancy by midlife (Ellison 2003: 322). However, these conversational exchanges did demonstrate that economic status and class divisions were on their minds. There seemed to be a subconscious need for individuals to separate themselves from the persons whom they imagined would actually need Planned Parenthood's services. Central University has a student body that comes from diverse economic backgrounds. My field notes showed that many CU students are from middle-class backgrounds; however, there are also many students who come from backgrounds that may offer less financial support or that do not benefit from job-linked insurance. VOX did witness its fair share of support for free contraception and other Planned Parenthood initiatives.

Another dominant strategy among resisters was to invoke tropes of gender appropriate behavior. I have included a brief overview of some popular historical and contemporary discourses surrounding gender. The social processes of dividing up people and social practices

along the lines of sexed identities refer to an individual's gender. Gender norms and role expectations are ingrained in social institutions (Lorber 2010: 9). In U.S. society, gender reflects a binary division, where one category is privileged and the other is devalued. Social practices can also be given a gendered role; for instance, it is an aspect of 1950's ideology that men occupy the public sphere, whereas, women occupy the private, domestic sphere (Beasley 2005). Many feminist scholars investigated how gender inequality can be articulated by economic, political, social, domestic and religious institutions.

There are some scholars who believe that biological determinism creates definite, fixed notions of identity. For instance, some women-centered feminisms claim that there are certain commonalities that women, as a group, share (Koedt 1970; Chodorow 1978; Daly 1978; Dworkin 1979; Rich 1980; Gilligan 1982). For example, women share a common essence or a common experience of womanhood, as well as, shared experiences of inequality. The aim of such framework is to recognize differences and celebrate those differences while trying not to position them in opposition to each other. I understand this as trying to present men and women outside of a traditional binary, for instance, if men are strong then women must be weak, and if women are thoughtful men are careless. These types of binaries always position men against women. Women-centered feminisms try to avoid such dichotomies. Some researchers argue that as a U.S. society, we are programmed to be uncomfortable with difference; Audre Lorde (1984: 281) asserts that we handle ~~d~~ifference in one of three ways, ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate." The notion of natural or biological difference separates groups in fundamental, irreversible ways; furthermore, these natural differences are employed to explain observable differences and place value on



certain characteristics (Rothenberg 1990: 44). In other words, the hierarchy of the sexes is regarded as a natural phenomenon.

Gendering processes begin as soon as the ultrasound determines the genitalia of the child. The processes of gender socialization are so omnipresent that they are sometimes difficult to recognize. As mentioned earlier, gender is assumed to be “bred into our genes” (Lorber 1994: 13). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992:463) note:

Bodies and biological processes are inextricably part of cultural histories, affected by human inventions ranging from the purely symbolic to the technological. It isn't that cultures simply “interpret” or assign “significance” as a cultural overlay to basically biological distinctions connect to sex; rather, social practices constitute in historically specific and changing ways not only gender (and sexual) relations but also such basic gender (and sexual) categories as “woman” and “man” and related categories such as “girl” or “lesbian” or “transsexual” or “lady” or “bitch”. “Female” and “male” label distinctions in potential sexual reproductive roles: All cultures known to us sort people at birth into two groups on the basis of anatomical distinctions potentially relevant to those roles.

Gender is socially constructed and rigidly defined by sex category (Dozier 2005). The paradigm that biological sex equals cultural gender is reaffirmed every day. For an extreme example, in the medical field, when intersexed infants are born, physicians hastily work to correct the problem of ambiguity. In the context of most western-style hospitals, the physician either assigns the child to be male or female because those are the only “real” or natural options that exist (Kessler 1990:4). Lorber (1994: 14) asserts that Western society's value system makes a case to legitimate gendering by claiming that gender comes directly from physiology—female and male procreative differences.

Cultural discourses assist in the construction of notions of motherhood, abortion and sexuality. I employ the term discourse following Foucault (1981) to encompass sets of ideas, practices and ways of producing meanings and, therefore, shaping one's behavior according to

that knowledge. When dominant discourses are present they tend to be perceived as “~~true~~” (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001). The next three sections will look into how normative views of motherhood, abortion, and sexuality affect the discursive processes that occur during VOX tabling sessions.

## **Motherhood**

VOX offers a persuasive case that authenticates the view that gender does not automatically flow from an individual’s physiology, even though some members of the larger campus community seem to adhere to the belief that an individual’s reproductive abilities effectively establishes a person’s gender. There is a large misconception on campus that *all women* desire to be mothers; this view ignores how advances in science and technology may act in transformative ways on ideas of pregnancy and personhood (Rapp 1991). It is hard for many people to comprehend the reasons why a woman would decide not to have children. Rich, Taket, Graham and Shelley (2011: 232) investigated the significance of being a childless woman in Australian society and discovered that the lived experiences of the women have been shaped by a “~~socio-cultural~~ synonym between woman and mother.” The women in this study experienced marginalized social positions and were deemed as deviant and unnatural, despite the growing phenomenon of childless women in Australia (Rich, Taket, Graham and Shelley 2011). Even more strikingly is Marcia C. Inhorn’s finding that, after she compiled over 150 ethnographies that dealt directly with women’s health, discovered that, in large part, “~~women~~ are still essentialized as reproducers” (2006: 350).

In the case of VOX outreach these common discourses are also occurring. The prevalence of the notion that woman equals mother was confirmed by several remarks that were directed towards VOX members. “~~Motherhood~~ is a part of being a woman,” “~~You~~ may not want children

now, but one day, I promise, you will,” and “A woman’s greatest meaning in life is to have children” this is just a small sample of some of the comments that were voiced. All of the above comments were made by females, one of whom had recently turned nineteen years old and had a fifteen month old son. Male students rarely made comments about women and motherhood; however, when they did comment it was always framed in a joking manner. For example, a group of five males passed the VOX table and shouted back, as if to give VOX members no chance to respond, “What else are women good for if they’re not having children!” The men all smiled and laughed together implying their complicity and/or agreement with the shouter’s comment. This group of young men automatically assumes that VOX’s ideals are inconsistent with motherhood; this comment made me question people’s perceptions of pro-choice activists. Can pro-choice activists not be mothers? Of course, they can be mothers—many pro-choice activists are mothers. So, I thought maybe this comment was directed towards VOX’s alignment with Planned Parenthood. Did these students view Planned Parenthood’s mission as counter to the ideals of motherhood? The next section on abortion looks into some common perceptions of Planned Parenthood which may have influenced the above remark.

The above interactions were common and are great examples of how traits, activities, and values can be gendered. The comments made by both male and female students wield gender essentialism, however, the male’s joking expressions seem to reduce women to their reproductive role (again, woman equals mother). VOX members constantly address such notions of “naturalized” feminine identities. Charlie had this to say in response to some of the students’ remarks:

I think what makes a woman a woman, and I know it’s been talked about, you know, and debated over, beaten to death, you know, the whole thing about a woman having her soul benefit as being, like, a child-bearer and things like that, I mean that’s wonderful if you want to do that, child birth is a beautiful thing, but really it’s not for everyone. So, I don’t

think that women should be labeled as just that one thing because there are so many other things that they *label themselves* [emphasis mine] as. So I think to be a woman means to decide what your ideals are and how you want to label yourself and making those responsible decisions on your own and I think that's part of, not just part of being a woman, but being an adult, and deciding what is best for you, you know, so that's kind of, that's what I think.

Charlie brings up some wonderful talking points. Her belief that people, specifically women, should have the ability to label themselves is at the heart of her feminist understanding. This statement speaks to the larger goals of VOX as a social movement organization. This social movement organization works to insure that women's reproductive rights are maintained and protected.

There were also occasions where both male and female students supported women's reproductive choice. Individuals showed their support for VOX's efforts in several ways. Some students walked up to the table to let VOX members know that they appreciated their efforts to promote reproductive awareness<sup>28</sup>. Other students took extra pamphlets and handouts to distribute among their friends. Some donned "Stand with Planned Parenthood" buttons and stickers. On one occasion, a mother visiting LSU's campus approached the VOX table and asked for advice on discussing sex and contraception use with her sixteen year old son. Whether these positive interactions comment on understandings of women outside of motherhood, I cannot be sure; however, they did effectively serve to help motivate the group to keep up all of their activist work.

## **Abortion**

The most obvious contestation towards VOX and their efforts stem from debates on abortion. Abortion is the topic that breeds the most aggression, and can even cause fear among

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<sup>28</sup> The majority of individuals who showed support for VOX were out-of-state students.

VOX activists. As Jennifer recalls –sometimes it feels like we have to operate underground...activism is really hard, there’s a lot of work to be done.” All VOX members claim that many students have very little knowledge of all the programs and services that Planned Parenthood offers. Furthermore, several VOX members assert that many CU students equate Planned Parenthood as nothing more than an –abortion factory.”<sup>29</sup> This was validated when a student told some VOX members that she couldn’t support VOX’s efforts because she was –pro-choice but not pro-abortion.” This comment demonstrates a common misconception of the term pro-choice; scholars have deliberated over the popular discourse that positions pro-choice individuals as being pro-abortion (see Ginsburg 1987 and Linders 2004). According to Ginsburg (1987: 628), many pro-life supporters often present pro-choice activists as being –anti-family” or even as –godless” individuals.

Often, during tabling sessions, VOX is positioned directly across from the CU pro-life group. For the most part, interactions between the two groups stays friendly, however, the occasional debate does ensue. During one session, a group of female students with the pro-life group yelled towards the VOX table –Yeah...we actually love babies!” The group was confirming a common discourse of pro-choice activists as –anti-family” and –baby haters”. On another occasion, one pro-life member, recognizing that VOX members identify as feminist, urged VOX members to –think of the women in the womb!” This comment offers a very interesting image—the visual representation of a woman literally in the womb. What does this image imply? For me, this statement is an extension of the common anti-abortion rhetorical strategy of assigning a personhood or identity to a fetus. In this instance, the female student urges

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<sup>29</sup> This is especially interesting considering that Planned Parenthood doesn’t even offer abortion services in Louisiana.

us to go a step further than just the common trope of understanding the embryo or the fetus as a fully formed (and presumably viable) baby capable of autonomous life—and thus a person. She wants us to recognize the fetus as a woman and thus deserving of feminist concern. Her perception reflects a misunderstanding of feminism, since many feminists today see themselves as activists for human equality, not just advocates for women. It is a common tactic of pro-life groups to offer visual imagery of fetuses as a method to deter abortive practices (Wynn and Trussell 2006). This common imagery of an “~~abortion-seeking~~ woman as a free and unencumbered agent of her own life” and “~~the~~ counter-vision of the innocent and dependent fetus” has achieved enough reverberation in American public discourse to considerably challenge women’s ability to choose (Linders 2004: 389). In addition to demonizing and exaggerating the agency of women who do not carry a pregnancy to term, this also completely absolves fertile men of any responsibility for producing unwanted pregnancies.

In addition, this social stigma surrounding abortion is effectively transferred to Planned Parenthood, as well as other, organizations that support the non-profit. This perception could help explain why so many students’ view VOX’s ideals as inconsistent with motherhood. When asked about this connection, Charlie had this to say:

I think people...get lost... especially those who are opposed to the organization, in the syntax and the words of being pro-choice and it doesn’t mean that the organization is pro-abortion, because I don’t think, I mean, me personally, obviously, nobody wants abortion to happen. It’s, it’s a terrible thing to have to happen, nobody wants to choose it. It’s a hard decision to make.

During a tabling session, a similar statement was made by a male staff member, who commented “I’m not pro-abortion...if one of my close friends was struggling with the decision, I would encourage them not to...but ultimately, it’s her decision and I would support her either way.” Both of these comments give me the impression that abortion is viewed as a bad thing that one

should avoid at all costs. I wonder if these statements speak to the understanding of a fetus as a human being. Charlie and I met for a follow-up interview and I asked her why she referred to abortion as a terrible thing in an earlier interview, she informed me that her beliefs stay very scientific and personally personhood should not apply to a fetus. I view abortion as a terrible position for a woman to have to be in due to lack of resources that could have helped her prevent it.” She also explained to me that she thought choosing abortion is a difficult decision because of the social stigma that surrounds such a decision. My analysis confirms that this is true and according to Marcia Ellison (2003: 336) all women whom she interviewed who made the decision to abort feared social judgment about that decision. Nevertheless, I can’t help but feel that Charlie has her own internalized social stigma towards abortion; is this because she is so familiar with the public discourses surrounding abortion? Is presenting abortion in such a manner nothing more than a strategy employed to gain support within the campus community in a public university in the South? There seems to be a moral-cultural landscape that VOX members have to navigate. That is, even as they support a women’s legal right to choose to have an abortion, they may be influenced by the dominant moral discourse that vilifies abortion itself as well as people who practice it. Not only does VOX downplay abortion, they also work hard to inform people of ways to avoid having to make such a decision.

VOX members stand firm in their belief that reproductive choices should be a decision that women are allowed to make for themselves. VOX members recognize the various factors that influence an individual’s reproductive choices. These reproductive choices are laden with all kinds of complexities. Rayna Rapp (1991: 385) illustrates this notion perfectly:

It is apparent that reproductive “choices” are far more than individual, or psychological. Broad demographic, sexual, reproductive (and nonreproductive) patterns are ultimately social patterns, contextualized by the rationalities of class, race, ethnicity, sex, religious

background, family, and reproductive history, and not simply by individual risks and benefits.”

Reproductive decision making is a complex process with many factors influencing an individual. Rapp discusses how social factors contribute to reproductive choices. I think that many people do not consider all of the social stresses that individuals encounter; there is no “one size fits all” reproductive solution. For the next section, I will explore how sexuality intersects with VOX’s main activist objectives.

## **Sexuality**

Understandings of sexuality and what is considered to be appropriate techniques of presenting sexuality offer the last form of resistance to be analyzed here. In the case of VOX, the topic of sex and sexuality, which is typically of a private nature (read: relegated to the private sphere), is positioned in a very public manner. During tabling sessions, VOX members wear bright pink t-shirts with glittery slogans such as “Sex Ed: Protecting Our Future.”<sup>30</sup> Colored, flavored, and female condoms are distributed around the table (see Figure 4.1). Moreover, tabling sessions are seen as an opportunity to educate the public about sex education and its importance in maintaining happy and healthy sex lives.

VOX held a tabling session<sup>31</sup> which focused on individuals’ sex education stories. During this session, students were encouraged to discuss what types of sex education they encountered in their schools, as well as from their parents and peers. The vast majority of students attended schools that focused on abstinence-only sex education. This is an approach that discusses the biology of reproduction, without educating students on practical methods of contraception. Most students claimed that they learned about condoms and birth control from their peers. This

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<sup>30</sup> These t-shirts are not worn for every tabling session.

<sup>31</sup> Most sessions lasted approximately three hours.



storytelling exercise served two major purposes; first, it allowed students to think critically about their sex education (or lack thereof) and second, it gave VOX the opportunity to educate them about the effective use of contraception.



Figure 4.1. This is an image of a VOX tabling session. Photograph taken by author.

Surprisingly, many of these college-age<sup>32</sup> students were noticeably uncomfortable openly discussing their own sex education experiences. My field notes confirmed a noticeable decline in the number of students that approached our table during this particular session. VOX members affirm that many students feel awkward discussing issues concerning sexuality. “Talking about sex makes people so shy...many people don’t think it’s proper to talk openly about something that is historically so private” Skylar added during the tabling session. This notion of sex as a private issue could also explain an exchange that took place between two friends that were walking together. As a male and female student walked up to the table together, the male nudged the female, pointed and jokingly said “This is the table for you!” She looked down at her shoes

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<sup>32</sup> When I use the term college-age, I am referring to a general age ranging from 18 to 25. I am aware that this age bracket is not all-inclusive (that is, there are both younger and older students on campus); however, this is the range that we encountered most frequently during tabling sessions.

and quietly replied “I’m okay, I think it’s a little too risqué for me.” This type of exchange was common with men laughing and joking and women responding with uneasiness, confusion, disgust or excitement.

I did not record a single encounter with male students addressing sex or contraception use when they did not use some form of humor to mediate the exchange. Humor performed many functions during these exchanges. I argue that humor was most often used to lessen the “tension” which occurred because of the sexual discourses. It seemed to help male students relax and the use of humor alleviated some embarrassment that they may have felt when they were asking questions. In these cases, humor helped mask men’s vulnerabilities due to a lack of knowledge about topics that supposedly “manly” men would already know. For instance, one young man was asking if there was a wrong way to put on condoms. He joked “you know, I never use those things. It takes the fun away.” My consultants and I interpreted this comment as implying that truly manly men don’t use condoms, however, at the same time he was seeking further information on condom use. The fact that humor was utilized mostly by male students definitely stands out. What does this highlight about how males perceive masculinity? Do they feel that they maintain control over the interaction by using jokes? Further research is necessary for an accurate interpretation of the use of humor as a verbal interaction.

In addition, some male students performed their masculinity by asserting that they, as men, shouldn’t have to be concerned with issues of birth control and safe sex. One student even went so far to say that “birth control is my girlfriend’s job; I’ll let her take care of that.” Alex quickly responded that “it’s not a women’s issue, it’s an every one issue.” I am not certain if this student made this remark because he was simply too embarrassed to discuss contraception or if he truly did not think it was an issue that concerned him. Assuming that he was serious about his

comment, he is implying a gender ideology that asserts that women singularly bear the burden of both reproductive and birth control. His comment touches on a much larger issue. Is birth control viewed as solely the responsibility of the woman? There were many male students who were genuinely concerned with learning about contraception use; however, many VOX members believe that the majority of male students do not view contraception and reproductive rights as ~~an~~ every one issue.”

### **Cross-Sex Interactions**

After evaluating my field notes on VOX tabling sessions, an intriguing pattern revealed itself. More male students than female students engaged in conversations dealing with sex and sexuality. When it came to topics of motherhood and abortion male students rarely voiced their opinions, while female students were very outspoken on these topics. Is this difference in involvement due to the fact that sexuality is considered part of a man’s domain and women’s sexuality has historically been viewed only in relation to men’s desires (Koedt 1970:186-189). Did female students feel obliged to maintain a respectable image when it came to topics of sexuality and were they obligated to talk about topics that are deemed within their domain (i.e. motherhood and abortion)? I ask myself if these exchanges would be different if they occurred in a same-sex setting. Would female students have felt more comfortable talking about sex if there were only other females around? It was common for groups of females to come together and ask questions or grab condoms when there were no males present in their group. It might be an effective activist tool for VOX to arrange some informative sessions in women’s dorms or other gendered spaces to assist with keeping students comfortable to engage. My consultants agree that addressing students in same-sex interactions could be an effective method in which to create more intimate interactions with students.

## **Conclusions**

Gendered language and individual monitoring of public behavior appears to play a big role during encounters that deal with reproductive issues. This study demonstrates that male and female students feel obligated to talk about particular topics, while they strategically avoid topics that are not considered within their own particular domain. VOX tabling sessions are seen as opportunities to actively engage with students on reproductive issues. Cross-sex interactions are intricately negotiated with students navigating campus public space by using different strategies such as humor, anger, enthusiasm or silence. I argue that public discourses surrounding the topics of discussion greatly influence how students responded to the presented topics (e.g. with resistance, support or indifference). This chapter also shows that gender cannot be isolated from social exchanges. The cultural construct of gender informs and organizes each interaction that VOX encounters.

## CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters have shown, there are many dynamics and features that make the Central University VOX organization an intriguing subject of study. In this thesis, I have examined the work of an organization and its members while framing its role as a community of practice, as well as a social movement organization. VOX members' shared commitments to the domain of reproductive justice and feminist activism persuaded each member to join the VOX community as an outlet for those interests. The VOX organization offered an opportunity for collective learning along with collective action directed towards student outreach and education.

I began this thesis with an in-depth outline of the theories and methods used for this project. I conducted participant observations, interviews, spot observations and archival research over a 14 month period. I followed Eric Lassiter's (2005) guidelines to create collaborative ethnography. This project can contribute to the methodology of collaborative ethnographies in several ways. For instance, during my first round of edits I had my two key consultants, Charlie and Jennifer, read over my work and they responded to the work via e-mail. I learned very quickly that this process was not assisting in the collaborative effort. So, we decided to gather at our favorite coffee house and we conducted three meetings which lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. We deliberated over what the purpose of the thesis should be and what should be included in this work. The actual process of meeting and discussing the project was a vital component to this thesis; this collaboration was the most rewarding part of my project; I feel as though I have allowed the members of CU VOX to speak for themselves. I recommend to anyone who is considering a collaborative project to never underestimate the importance of face to face interaction.

This thesis presents CU VOX as a student organization, as well as a limb of advocacy for Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Chapter 2 discusses the ways in which PPFA plays a very active role with VOX organizations and its members. PPFA provides both financial and other support (e.g. training) to VOX chapters around the country. In this chapter, I framed CU VOX as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) with a specific domain, community and practice (Wenger 2007). CU VOX shares a common domain of interest which is expressed as a commitment to the domain of reproductive justice. I have established that each member employs his or her own agency in deciding to participate in VOX and that these individuals hold a variety of personal views that both intersect and diverge from PPFA's platform. Chapter 2 also discusses how VOX members have a certain shared competence on historical and current situations of reproductive rights.

Furthermore, CU VOX members interact and learn together, a key component of communities of practice (Wegner 2007). During meetings, members participate in storytelling activities that function to highlight relevant issues and beliefs which in turn help to create a shared sense of community and belonging among VOX members. Storytelling is also utilized by VOX as a tool to promote VOX's social movement objectives. I have also argued in this chapter that the main "practice" of VOX is in its student outreach during tabling sessions. Tabling sessions offer an opportunity for VOX members to interact directly with students. During these encounters VOX presents information about reproductive issues and concerns, they provide information on the VOX organization itself, as well as, promoting awareness of the necessity of PPFA. Overall, VOX is a community of practice that works towards collective learning and problem solving with regards to reproductive advocacy.

Chapter 3 presents a specific look at how public space functions on college campuses. Louisiana State University's Free Speech Alley has a long history of social movement engagement which highlights how the public sphere operates within the context of this campus. I suggest in this chapter that the designated space of FSA should be considered a "semi-public space" that is meant for public use "under conditions" of the university (Palyvou 2004: 209). This conclusion was due to the censorship imposed on the alley by University implemented regulations of what is considered "fair play." All of these regulations, I claim, were imposed with the interest of keeping the University respectable; the University decided which public, which ideas and which activities are legitimate. I also established that Free Speech Alley experienced a transformation from a space designated for open forums into a space reserved for student organizations.

Free Speech Alley offers a venue for social movements to represent themselves to the larger campus community (Mitchell 1995). Chapter 3 focuses on the women's social movement usage of Free Speech Alley; this student venue offered the opportunity for women to introduce their agendas into a wider discourse. Ultimately, Free Speech Alley made women even more visible on campus. I have deliberated over Habermas's singular public sphere and critiqued his distinction between the public and private spheres. I claim that this dichotomy ignores the possibility that private concerns can and should be matters of "public concern." In addition, I argue that the public/private sphere dichotomy should be challenged in order to assist in maintaining a democratic space.

And finally, Chapter 4 examines how popular public discourses of gender and cross-sex interactions affect student reactions to VOX advocacy. I have made the case that popular public discourses greatly influence how CU students approach topics of motherhood, abortion and

sexuality. I claim that cross-sex interactions also work to mediate these topics; these exchanges reveal common interpretations of womanhood as being naturally and irreducibly linked to motherhood (woman equals mother), of pro-choice advocates as “anti-family” or even “godless” and of Planned Parenthood as an “abortion-factory.” My research also reveals that male and female students engage in discussions that they may perceive as being within their own domains. For instance, more male students than female students engaged in conversations dealing with sex and sexuality; however, when topics of motherhood and abortion were being discussed male students rarely engaged the conversation, whereas, female students were very outspoken on this topics.

An interesting feature of these interactions between VOX members and students is that humor was often used by male students to mediate the exchanges. I discussed how humor performed many functions during these exchanges. For example, humor was used to lessen the tension which occurred due to the sexual discourse, humor alleviated some embarrassment that students felt when asking questions, and humor was also employed to essentialize gender differences. Peter Lyman (1987) has a wonderful article, *The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship: A Case Study of the Role of Sexist Jokes in Male Group Bonding*, which discusses joke form and joking relationships especially in relation to male bonding. According to Lyman (1987: 170), the humor of male bonding relationships are generally sexual and aggressive in nature, and frequently include sexist or racist jokes. Lyman also argues that the jokes that men tell about women in the presence of other men, which tend to be more aggressive and sexual, serve the ultimate purpose of male bonding. Some of the examples of humor presented in Chapter 4, specifically the group of men that shouted “what else are women good for if they’re not having children,” demonstrate features of friendship and male bonding. This project suggests



several possible directions for further research. For example, I would like to further investigate the use of joking employed by male students, especially within the context of sexuality. Overall, I feel that my investigation of language and gender deserves further elaboration which can only be accomplished by extending my research frame.

During a discussion with my thesis committee it was brought to my attention that race was not discussed in this thesis. My committee wondered why a discussion of race was not included, especially considering the history of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. This element was not intentionally ignored; I never intended to make race invisible. Within the CU VOX organization whiteness is a dominant feature with only two members being people of color; Lolita is of Indian descent and Alex is African American. For this work, I really focused on CU VOX and the topics which they felt were important to discuss. Race was not a topic that VOX members discussed on a regular basis and for this reason I did not focus on race. The only time I can recall race making its way into the conversation was during a dialogue on anti-Planned Parenthood billboards that presented the image of Planned Parenthood as targeting minority groups. Though these billboards clearly upset group members (look back to Chapter 2), the conversation was quickly redirected to a different topic. After meeting with my committee, I was left asking myself –“Why don’t VOX members talk about race?” Being raised in the South, I was always taught that it was rude to talk about race. So unfortunately, I initially took it for granted that there was no discussion on race and how race continues to impact Planned Parenthood. Because of these shortcomings, I began to question why race and specifically women of color were being excluded from the conversation and was this exclusion intentional or just a feature of student organizations. These are some questions that are unfortunately left unanswered in this thesis.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the literature of feminist studies, studies of social movement organizations, communities of practices, ethnographies of student activism and collaborative ethnographies.

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## VITA

Jordan Rebecca Kea earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in 2010. She majored in International Studies with a focus in Global Studies, and she minored in Italian and Political Science.

After graduating from Louisiana State University, Kea decided to pursue a Master of Arts in Anthropology. The summer before her first semester, she traveled to Peru with Dr. David Chicoine and experienced her first archaeological dig at the site of Caylan. It was a transformative experience for Kea and upon her return she was certain that anthropology was the correct direction for her. Kea's ultimate goal is to teach secondary education in southeastern Louisiana. She is currently working on her teaching certification and can't wait to get in front of a classroom.

During her master's studies in anthropology at Louisiana State University, Kea was awarded the LSU Board of Supervisor's Scholarship which covered tuition expenses for three semesters. Her Master of Arts degree will be conferred in August 2012.