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Abortion Travels in Contemporary American Cinema: Parental Consent and the Bumpy Ride to Termination in Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Rachel Lee Goldenberg's *Unpregnant*

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Abstract
Although abortion was legalized in 1973 through the US Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade*, it is state legislatures that have ultimately acted as the final arbiters on the matter ever since. As a result, only over the course of the last decade, more than two hundred abortion restrictions have been enacted nationwide in the United States. As more and more restrictions are put in place in an attempt at policing women's bodies, the practice that came to be known somewhat inappropriately as 'abortion tourism' is becoming increasingly common. More and more women travel across state lines in order to benefit from a safe procedure while evading the legal limits imposed upon them in their home states. This is even more acutely so in the case of young, under-age women, as only a few states do not have parental consent statutes covering abortion provisions. It is against this background that my article discusses two recent movies which tackle the issue of teen pregnancy and 'abortion mobility,' *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) and *Unpregnant* (2020). I look at how both travel narratives illustrate, in different genres and manners, the hurdles (young) women have to navigate to gain access to necessary medical care and expose the state-sanctioned obstacles to abortion in two stories about female friendship and empathy above all.

Keywords: medical tourism; abortion mobility; road narrative; drama; comedy

It has been almost fifty years since the landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), in which the Supreme Court of the United States found that a pregnant woman's choice to terminate a pregnancy is protected under the Constitution, albeit always balanced against the state's legitimate interest in guarding "the potentiality of human life" (Jane Roe, et al., Appellants, v. Henry Wade). Two decades later, a similarly important but perhaps less symbolically significant decision on abortion rights, in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992), confirmed protections for the "central right recognized by Roe" against "unduly burdensome interference" by the government, while also "accommodating the State's profound interest in potential life" (Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania, et al., Petitioners, v. Robert P. Casey, et al., etc.). NARAL Pro-Choice America has argued, however, that the Court's decision in *Casey*, which introduced a rather ambiguous "undue burden" test under which laws restricting abortion should be evaluated, led in practice to state restrictions "previously found to violate the right to privacy and effectively invited states to impose barriers on women's access to abortion." As a result, the anti-abortion movement has been gaining ground in the United States, and its advocates, deeply aware that it is rather difficult to make abortion illegal, are instead trying to make it practically impossible (Bernstein 1473). If the stance anti-abortionists once took was to demand the re-criminalization of abortion, today the preferred approach is one of "*audacious incrementalism* [which] increasingly restricts access through multiple tactics that condition personal decision and available professional services" (Maier 60).

Only in the previous decade, more than two hundred abortion restrictions have been enacted as part of the so-called TRAP laws ("Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers") meant to limit women's access to needed health care in the form of longer or mandatory waiting periods, ultrasound requirements, insurance restrictions or complete prohibition of insurance coverage, among others (Brown 1). Moreover, abortion clinics have been closing down at a record pace due to failure to meet the excessive and costly regulations imposed by these laws, which seem practically designed to put abortion facilities out of business. Among the most bizarre of these requirements would be specific

temperature settings for various parts of the building and other similar regulations regarding ventilation systems, the size of janitors' closets or parking spaces, and/or precise demands regarding the landscaping outside the facility (prochoiceamerica.org).

It has been argued that "the Trump era has seen the reinvigoration and broadening of the politics of abortion" (Wilson 392) in the sense that, while state legislatures have been trying to limit access to the procedure for years, they would nonetheless resort to more indirect or covert means. Trump's election in 2016 and his administration's conservative position on the issue led to a "sudden and pronounced return to a strategy of more direct and aggressive assaults on abortion access" (Wilson 371). Just as significant in this respect has been the robust conservative majority on the Supreme Court enabled by Trump's appointment of no fewer than three Justices. As a consequence, "2017 saw twenty states enact sixty-four antiabortion policies, and 2018 resulted in fifteen states enacting twenty-seven such policies," while "[t]he most recent year, 2019, has continued the trends started in 2011, with nineteen states enacting fifty-eight new abortion restrictions and regulations" (Wilson 381). Some of these radical policies have been specifically designed to lead to challenges before the newly refreshed SCOTUS. Moreover, the introduction of COVID-19-related restrictions in 2020 has moved state governments to limit abortion services even further by deeming them "nonessential" and elective medical procedures (Wilson 384).

Concomitantly, however, there has been increased motivation for some states to push for more protective policies and laws, as has been the case, for example, with the state of New York. Attorney General Letitia James has criticized the response of conservative states to limit even more access to reproductive care on grounds of the present pandemic and woefully observed that

> Nearly 50 years after *Roe* codified into law the fundamental right to an abortion for every woman in this country, anti-choice activists nationwide still work day-after-day to make it harder for women to access the abortion coverage they are constitutionally guaranteed. To be clear, the coronavirus is not an excuse for federal, state, or local governments to curtail women's reproductive freedoms or limit their choices. (qtd. in Wilson 391)

To this end, New York's Reproductive Health Act, recently signed into law, aimed to send "a clear message that whatever happens in Washington, women in New York will always have the fundamental right to control their own body," and, soon after, states like Illinois, Rhode Island, and Vermont followed suit (Wilson 390), similarly emboldened by what was perceived as an attack on reproductive rights supported by the Trump administration.

The recent years have also witnessed both an increase and a change in the pattern of *representation* of abortion in television and cinema, often on shows or in movies created or written by women, to such an extent that "the portrayal of abortion online and onscreen is a new and rapidly developing area of research, particularly because of its potential for significant public and political impact" (Conti and Cahill 1). And as the industry has begun to tackle the issue more and more openly and intently, thus relinquishing one of its longest-held taboos (Buckley), recent productions are illustrations of the contemporary trend away from classic tropes about abortion (Haynes).

Sociologist Gretchen Sisson, the main investigator at the Abortion Onscreen program at the University of California, San Francisco, notes that early cinematic narratives tackling abortion were usually "cautionary tales that provided a kind of moral commentary on the pregnancy itself" (qtd. in Haynes). Moreover, even as late as the first decade of the new millennium, onscreen characters who were confronted with unplanned pregnancies would "agonize . . . about what to do or, if the show was set in the past, weighed back-alley procedures. Babies were often carried to term or lost to miscarriage. Terminations led to psychological or physical problems or death" (Buckley). According to Sisson, "what we're seeing now is much more focused on the woman's experience, and much more of a focus on telling different types of stories for different types of women, so there's much greater range of characters getting abortions across a greater range of genres" (qtd. in Haynes).

Nonetheless, it should also be noted that despite arguably trying to normalize abortion, onscreen and otherwise, by opening up the conversation and by moving away from the stigma historically associated with it, consistent patterns of misrepresentation have been documented.

Sisson and her colleagues observe that the characters who resort to ending their pregnancies tend to be younger, whiter, and better-off than the real-life American abortion patients; that the legal, financial, and logistical obstacles which limit American women's access to the procedure are largely disregarded in fictional depictions onscreen; and that television portrayals tend to exaggerate the medical risks associated with abortion (Herold and Sisson 1). For instance, of the thirteen movies dealing with the topic of abortion in 2020 (the highest number to debut over the course of one year to date), a third featured characters in their teens, who in reality constitute but a small fraction of American abortion patients. Similarly, only about a third of the characters were shown to confront limitations of access to the procedure, in the form of parental consent and lack of a nearby clinic ("Abortion Onscreen in 2020")–precisely the main issues which my article will explore in detail in relation to the two movies under analysis, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant*.

While dramas have regularly been the vehicle of choice for abortion plotlines on American television and on the silver screen (Sisson 3; Herold and Sisson 3), recent years have witnessed an upsurge in the number of comedy shows that feature characters seeking and getting abortions. This goes to show that "abortion plotlines can incorporate humor and satire instead of or in addition to more traditional and serious dramatic elements" (Herold and Sisson 3). This is not surprising, given that comedy "offers a space for representing social controversy and social change that might be too threatening when encoded as realist drama" (Dow qtd. in Cuklanz 14). This refocusing similarly serves to subvert and challenge the "predominant social structures around race, gender, social class, queerness and sexuality, and the ways that these components of identity intersect through the institutions of family, marriage, and parenthood" (Sisson 14). Moreover, Sisson argues, "comedy is inherently destigmatizing," and if "you open up the range of narratives that we are able to tell, then more women are going to feel comfortable with the experiences that they had and interpreting them however is appropriate" (qtd. in Jones).

Notable recent examples include Gillian Robespierre's 2014 *Obvious Child*, which features an almost-thirty modern urban heroine,

who is also a stand-up comedienne, and whose decisions illustrate the ups and downs of dealing with the reality of abortion. In Alex Thompson's 2020 *Saint Frances*, a young woman in her thirties, still unsure about what to do with her life, is confronted with an unwanted pregnancy precisely as she becomes nanny to a sweet girl. Rachel Lee Goldenberg's 2020 *Unpregnant* marks a break by tackling the issue of teen pregnancy and explores the limits imposed by parental consent statutes and lack of access to relevant reproductive care in a fresh take on the buddy road movie.

In fact, both movies discussed in this article as recent representations of the issue of abortion in contemporary American cinema engage head-on with the topic of teen pregnancy and the race to end it against the background of legal restrictions and limitations imposed by parental consent statutes and lack of local/regional abortion providers. Both Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Goldenberg's *Unpregnant* show that sometimes, in order to have access to relevant, urgent, and private reproductive care, young women have to cross state lines and navigate on their own–and hundreds of miles away from home–the hurdles imposed by restrictive laws.

This phenomenon of traveling across state (and even country) lines in order to be able to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in a safe environment is not new in the United States. On the contrary, prior to the 1970s, so-called 'abortion tourism' or 'abortion travels' were taking place in different regions in Western Europe, particularly in Great Britain, after abortion had been legalized there in 1967, but also in neighboring Mexico or in Puerto Rico. An issue of the *London Sunday Times* reported back in the day, for example, that "pregnant American girls now substantially outnumber German and other European girls," and the increasing number of women seeking abortions overseas prompted the British Secretary of Social Services to demand "much tougher controls on private nursing homes and clinics . . . because of the risk that the rush of girls from America may eventually lead to 'package tour' flights to London" (qtd. in Reagan 346). After abortion was legalized in the state of New York in 1970, thousands of American women would cross state lines to benefit from safe procedures in the legal abortion clinics there. Apparently, during the first two years since the legalization of abortion in New York,

over 65% of patients came from outside the state (Reagan 350). Many women still do it to this day, and, as Donna Lieberman, the New York Civil Liberties Union's Director observes, "updating New York's abortion law to protect the rights guaranteed by *Roe v. Wade* is more critical than ever" (qtd. in Wilson 390).

Nowadays, as a result of more and more states adopting restrictive laws and due to clinics being forced to shut down, a so-called 'abortion desert' has been created (an area which stretches from Florida to New Mexico and north into the Midwest) from where women have to travel to escape the legal barriers imposed upon them in their home states (Hennessy-Fiske). If and when they can afford the travel outside state lines, these women go hundreds of miles and spend good money to terminate their pregnancies, even with movement restrictions in place due to the ongoing pandemic. According to Planned Parenthood, abortion clinics in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada saw a seven-fold increase in the number of patients coming from Texas over the course of one single month after abortions were suspended in Texas as a result of the coronavirus situation (McCammon). This, once again, shows that when individuals are not able to access relevant healthcare at home, they *will* travel to get it.

While the Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* made no distinctions based on the age of women seeking to terminate their pregnancies, in its aftermath, state legislatures mobilized to pass laws requiring minors to obtain parental consent before considering the procedure. Shoshanna J. Erlich notes that "the underlying premise of these laws is that young women cannot reliably decide for themselves that they are not yet ready to embrace motherhood" (64). She similarly observes that another landmark decision regarding minors' rights of reproductive choice, in *Bellotti v. Bird* (1979), both recognized and restricted young women's reproductive rights by highlighting "the peculiar vulnerability of children; their inability to make critical decisions in an informed, mature manner; and the importance of the parental role in child rearing" (qtd. in Erlich 65), speaking to the minors' position of parental dependence and lack of decisional autonomy, even with respect to their own bodies. The American Medical Association's Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs

remarks that, under current legislation, minors may be pushed to desperate measures ("run away from home, obtain a 'back-alley' abortion, or resort to self-induced abortion") in their need to maintain the confidentiality of their pregnancies, which indeed has been "one of the leading reasons for illegal abortion deaths since the U.S. Supreme Court decided the existence of a constitutional right to abortion in 1973" ("Mandatory Parental Consent to Abortion").

It is against this background that the remainder of my article discusses *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant*, two very recent cinematic representations of the issue of teen pregnancy and 'abortion mobility.' I look at how both travel narratives illustrate, in different genres and manners, the hurdles (young) women have to navigate to gain access to necessary medical care and expose the state-sanctioned roadblocks to abortion in two stories which not only delve into, but also humanize these realities, and upend the manner in which they have been portrayed over the years in popular culture. Even though it could be argued that the two narratives start from the idea of *forced mobility* (due to medical, but also and perhaps primarily to political reasons), it is my intention to show that this forced movement outside the main characters' comfort zones (both physical and psychological) becomes the pretext for a (feminist) update of the road movie genre in order to make it respond to new political and social calls and explore new meanings of mobility in the twenty-first century.

It has been argued that "travel and dislocation are two concepts that have always been central to the American story" (Varvogli xv). As the "very birth and adolescence of America seems crucially founded upon the notion of the journey" (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 7), mobility has been quintessential to the American cultural identity since its dawning days and a defining manifestation of the American way of life throughout history. This essential cultural narrative of movement and mobility has aptly found its expression in the road genre, which communicates "the mood of the country, the character of the people, and the sense of mission Americans feel so central to their national experience" (Primeau qtd. in Fujii 135). In his *Romance of the Road* (1996), Ronald Primeau observed that "Americans are in love with roads and cars" and this romance is

celebrated across media in "song, poetry, film, and video" (ix). Moreover, he argues, road narratives have constituted an "American favorite for that process of composing order and meaning into experience" (Primeau ix).

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) is considered the formative literary source for the American road movie (Laderman, "What a Trip" 42), especially for that distinctive rebel version that emerged in the late 1960s (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 10). It "infused the cinematic act of driving with a politically rebellious spirit, best exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969)" (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 4). Laderman observes that the road movie represents a natural historical continuation of journey literature as both types of narratives share the same "thematic impulse of cultural critique" (*Driving Visions* 6). In other words, the force that drives most road movies is "an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique" (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 2).

Along the same lines, but this time from an openly feminist perspective, Alexandra Ganser observes that in the hands of women authors road narratives "have told cross-country journeys as pleasurable and empowering, as a chance for personal discovery and exploration, and as cultural critique" (14), especially given that, traditionally, discourses of mobility have been shaped by a masculinist subjectivity that determinedly marginalized women. Indeed, Kerouac's *On the Road* has been regarded as the epitome of masculinist travel narratives (Enevold iii). The release of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which challenged patriarchal culture and norms, produced "vital changes in the Kerouacian road narrative, revising its status from being mainly a masculinist buddy road trip, a project of masculine identity-formation, to a possible vehicle also for the feminist voyage of the female" (Enevold 7). Marking "an important turning point in the popular and academic reception of the road film" (Cohan and Hark 10), Ridley Scott's foundational movie took the classic formula of the road narrative and infused it with feminist social critique, thus "jump-starting the genre into the 1990s" and reestablishing "the frontier of modern nomadism as the domain of conflicting social forces" (Atkinson qtd. in Laderman, *Driving Visions* 184). Moreover, it has been argued that "in the absence of men, on the road Thelma and Louise create a paradigm of female friendship, produced out of their willful refusal of the male

world and its laws," and that, no matter how ultimately tragic their story turns out to be, the two outcasts "have reinvented sisterhood for the American screen" (Dargis qtd. in Laderman, "What a Trip" 54).

Deborah Paes de Barros observes that the road story can be read as a "manifesto of American cultural consciousness" and as a "mythic representation of history and ideology" (qtd. in Ganser 14). However, as Ganser contends, the American myths of mobility have historically reflected the commanding perspective of the (male) WASP and "rest on a construction of alterity and hegemonic spatial politics which, for a number of Americans, has produced territorial confinement: the slave quarter, the Native American reservation, the internment camps for Japanese-Americans" (16). There is, consequently, a critical need for stories coming from the margins, from the underrepresented, who thus reclaim both space and a voice to challenge and overturn the dominant ideologies of gender, race, or class. From this point of view, road narratives offer what Katherine Mills has called "an excellent case study of how people at the margins play with the mobility of meaning" (qtd. in Ganser 38). Neil Campbell similarly notes that "the road text can be read as an articulation of the 'philosophical capacity to shift views and destabilize assumptions'" (qtd. in Ganser 38). This may explain the appeal of travel narratives for authors bearing activist agendas and goes to show how, in the twenty-first century, they can be turned into powerful weapons in the hands of those traditionally and conventionally disempowered.

If road narratives are illustrative of the contemporary national mood, then Hittman's and Goldenberg's abortion stories speak to the commitment of American indie cinema to respond to insistent changes and challenges in American society. Interviewed about her *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, writer/director Hittman confessed that it had been brewing inside her for the longest of times, since she read about the case of a 28-year-old Irish woman who died from sepsis following a miscarriage (she had been denied a potentially life-saving abortion due to Ireland's constitutional ban on abortions). She found that this tragic case "became so easy to translate to the States" after Trump's election (Hittman qtd. in Mitchell) that she intended her movie to come out during the 2020 election cycle as a warning for the possible times ahead and in

support of young women everywhere who suffer as a result of limitations to relevant healthcare. The movie-making process itself was confronted with waves of resistance, especially due to its rather controversial and intimate topic, supposedly better fitted for a documentary. Hittman argues that "there are stigmas around representing female issues and experiences in the context of a fictional narrative film" derived from the fact that "women's stories are less represented on screen so they're seen as niche" (qtd. in Aroesti). Not only did the production come out as planned, but it has also received tens of nominations and multiple awards over the last two years, both at home and internationally.

When we first meet 17-year-old Autumn (debut role for Sidney Flanigan), she is pouring her heart out with a guitar performance on a school talent show, and the lyrics foreshadow both her predicament, which becomes the driving force of the narrative (an unwanted pregnancy which leads to her experience of forced mobility), and her emotional breakdown at the end of the movie: "He makes me do things I don't want to do / He makes me say things I don't want to say / And though I try to break away I know I can't stop saying I adore him / Can't stop doing things for him / He's got the power of love over me" (*NRSA*). Autumn appears burdened with the weight of the world and her plight becomes more obvious when she sorrowfully examines her belly in the mirror in the privacy of her own room. The viewer accompanies this uncommonly quiet young woman as she goes to get tested at a local clinic, where she learns about her pregnancy amid children's drawings plastered on the walls and leaves with numerous (and ultimately unhelpful) leaflets.

The lack of support and adequate advice the pregnant teen receives at this challenging point in her life, which literally sets her on the road towards resolution, is even more apparent when Autumn is given an ultrasound in her local clinic in rural Pennsylvania. She is shown her "beautiful baby," made to hear "the most magical sound [she] will ever hear" (*NRSA*), and lied to about how far along she is. Because of her obvious reluctance regarding the pregnancy, Autumn is advised that "once you have that beautiful baby in your arms you'll forget that you ever had any doubts," but should the doubts linger, they promise to get her in touch with an adoption agency. When the young woman tentatively explores the

possibility of ending her pregnancy, the lady at the clinic makes her watch a film which "unmasks the terrible truth that abortion is an act of violence which kills a baby" (*NRSA*). Nevertheless, by now she seems determined to undergo the procedure and starts researching her possibilities on the internet. She is quick to learn disappointingly that under the law in her home state, "the parent of a minor must consent before an abortion is provided" (*NRSA*), which leads her to documenting more drastic measures regarding self-induced abortions promoted by various sources online. Consequently, she is shown downing dozens of vitamin C pills, drinking mouthwash, and carrying punches to her stomach from all sides, which one more time brings her to tears in front of her mirror. In essence, Autumn's first run-in with the law, which is pivotal to and typical of road narratives, occurs at home and constitutes the trigger and starting point of her journey.

It is when Autumn becomes sick at work that her cousin and friend Skylar (played with quiet empathy by Talia Ryder) learns about her difficult situation and with very few words spoken between the two of them (it seems that they are able to communicate through looks only and their dialogues rarely amount to significant verbalizations), they get ready for New York, in order for Autumn to have an abortion. In preparation for their unforeseen, disruptive journey, they put together all the money they have, steal some from their employer, as well, and embark on an early-morning bus trip to New York. It is here that the viewer catches glimpses of rural Pennsylvania and its deserted industrial sites, through the bus window. The latter becomes a medium of reflection for Autumn, who is shown pensively taking in the scenery, while her friend sleeps comparatively carelessly. David Laderman observes that the reflection of characters in glass and mirrors is a staple trope of road movies, which serves as a "literal projection of character onto the car, and into the space being traveled," and which similarly "helps visualize aesthetically the theme of self-exploration as a projection of self through space" (*Driving Visions* 16).

Their point of arrival, the bus terminal in New York, appears overwhelming for the two young women who had probably never traveled outside their state. They seem to find it difficult to navigate the subway

and the many rides which follow, with the city's intricate metro system serving as a metaphor for the complex negotiation of teen abortion itself. Moreover, and not just metaphorically, the baggage they carry is heavy and impractical, further hindering their mobility. Indeed, the great bulk of Autumn and Skylar's journey is not the open road and the relative convenience of a vehicle, but the overcrowded New York subway, where the scenery consists of the blinding lights of the city and the artificial lighting of the arcades in which they spend several nights. But even in the absence of the open road and within the contained, at times claustrophobic, space of the transport system in New York, their journey is not without perils, as travel narratives seldom are. For instance, the two women are approached by a pervert/predator who exposes himself and scares them into getting off the train before their point of destination. Once again, the two women are never pictured commenting extensively on these encounters or on any of the obstacles that come their way during their journey, be they bureaucratic, financial, or personal. The conversations are sparse, but this falls in line with the unassuming protagonist(s) and the generally somber tone of the narrative, as well as with the predominantly cool grey coloring of the settings and the low-key soundtrack.

When the pregnancy turns out to be more advanced than Autumn was led to believe during her consultation at the local clinic in Pennsylvania, the two young women are sent to a different abortion provider in Manhattan. This extends and complicates the journey, leading to more subway rides to and fro, more nights spent sleeplessly in the arcades, more frugal pastry breakfasts (rare occasions for smiles and childish enthusiasm), but also to no money left for the trip back home. And this is where the narrative plays on an earlier chance encounter and reintroduces the figure of Jasper, whom Skylar calls and convinces to hang out in exchange for a loan to pay the bus tickets home (but only within the confined area of the subway station, despite his protests and attempts at derailing their course). It is at this moment that the movie highlights the obvious bond between the two young women: their deep understanding of their plight is shown at its apex when Skylar has to give in to Jasper's kisses and touches, all this time holding Autumn's hand,

who waits, behind a pillar and hidden from sight, for the ordeal to end for her friend. This quiet but symbolic image of their interlocked fingers is evocative of the final moments in *Thelma and Louise* and constitutes a similar visual rendition of female resistance and unity, an analogous frozen frame of "two women whose clasped hands are their most powerful weapon" ("Women Who Kill Too Much").

Autumn's abortion appointment was filmed at an actual Planned Parenthood branch in Manhattan and the scene of protesters praying and singing outside the clinic is real, not staged for the movie. Producer Adele Romanski observes that "it was never violent or unsafe or confrontational," as "there was never any direct engagement between our crew and the protesters" (qtd. in Mitchell). This adds to the veracity and impact of the procedure, especially for such young women as the film's protagonist, and also provides contrast to the quiet indoors at the facility. One of the most poignant scenes in the movie occurs at this point and it seems that the tension which has been building up so far (both inside and outside the protagonist) reaches momentum. In the short interview conducted by the Planned Parenthood worker prior to the procedure, it is revealed that Autumn has been most certainly physically and sexually abused by her partners. The close-up shots here, which frame Autumn's face and focus closely on her emotional reactions in this scene, add up to the climactic tension and to the emotional depth of this moment in the plot. This is the only part in the movie where the protagonist seems to have let her guard down and shown, with controlled subtlety, the emotional impact of her predicament and its more profound implications. In the scenes following the procedure, and staying true to the tone so far, the conversation between the two women does not amount to much, as Autumn provides rather vague and unemotional answers to Skylar's natural curiosities and the two embark on a bus ride which is to take them home. Theirs has been a journey traveled mostly in silence and quiet solitude, nevertheless subversive of patriarchal order both through the endeavor itself (long-distance mobility) and through its endpoint (the abortion). Moreover, their journey has also revealed the strength of their friendship and the power of unassuming, unwavering female solidarity.

In contrast to Hittman's restrained, low-key, unshowy, and poignant drama, Goldenberg's cinematic rendition of abortion mobility takes the form of an excessive, loud, colorful, energetic, and openly feminist comedy. The second movie in 2020 to feature young women crossing state lines to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, *Unpregnant* similarly seeks to normalize the conversation about abortion and the representation of a woman's right to choose, while at the same time exposing the same legislative and logistic hurdles that power *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*. Only this time the creators are "using a comedic lens to say '*Why is this so hard*?'" (Goldenberg qtd. in Singh-Kurtz)

Veronica (exuberant Haley Lu Richardson) is 17 and a straight-A high-school senior in Missouri who is bound for an Ivy League university. There is an entire wall in her home dedicated to her achievements in Calculus and the Debate Club, a Dean's List distinction, and other similar awards. She is also very popular, has a seemingly nice boyfriend (Alex MacNicoll) and a good relationship with her mother (Mary McCormack), who is very religious–a picture of the Pope hangs next to pictures of Veronica as a young girl. Veronica is also unintentionally pregnant and baffled to learn that in order to have her pregnancy terminated she must circumvent her home state parental consent statutes and journey a thousand miles across four states in order to receive relevant healthcare in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Fittingly, her travel companion becomes her long-lost friend Bailey (quirky Barbie Fereira), which gives the two girls the opportunity to rekindle their friendship and take it to another level of trust and commitment by the end of their journey. After meticulous planning and careful mapping of the itinerary, the two young women embark on the adventure of a lifetime on board Bailey's muscle car–another staple of road-trip movies. True to the narrative genre, their trip quickly takes a turn for the unexpected when it is revealed that the car has been reported stolen by its true owner, Bailey's mother's boyfriend, and now the police are after them. Ducking the police with the help of some local teens they befriend at a roadside diner in Texas (still another essential feature of the genre), the two travel buddies overcome this first bump in the road and accompany their new friends to a fairground in Amarillo, in the Texas Panhandle, where they are promised a ride to a city

closer to their destination. Their stay in Amarillo is not without significance, as detours in road trip movies hardly are. It is here that Veronica learns that Bailey is gay after the latter crushes on a star motorist they meet at the fairground (played by Australian singer and songwriter Betty Who) and seemingly has her first kiss. It is under these circumstances that the two long-lost best-friends reconnect and enthuse during a carousel ride that "we're gay and pregnant!" (*Unpregnant*). The carousel ride is especially significant, particularly if interpreted as an alternative representation of their abortion journey across the country– essentially a joyride, powered by friendship and high-octane muscle (much like Betty Who's motorcycle) and a lot of noise. This once again contrasts with the quiet and needlessly roundabout route to abortion, via the public transportation system, in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*. So, even though in both cases forced mobility results in a rather circuitous journey, in one case it is merry and dynamic (*Unpregnant*), whereas in the other (*NRSA*) it is tortuous and depressing.

It has been argued that the movie highlights "a decades-old relationship of two interconnected social movements: a woman's right to choose and LGBTQ+ equality" (Reynolds). Daniel Reynolds further notes that landmark Supreme Court decisions regarding LGBTQ+ rights rely heavily on past victories in reproductive freedom, especially in the 1960s and '70s, but also at the beginning of the new millennium. For instance, in their decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), a case regarding the so-called anti-sodomy laws in the United States, the Court included a passage from a previous decision in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), which stated that

> These matters, involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime, choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State. (United States, Supreme Court, Lawrence)

From this perspective, the movie can also be interpreted as a celebration of the intertwined efforts by feminists and LGBTQ+ activists for civil and reproductive rights.

As in most travel narratives, the kindness of strangers is most often paralleled by the menace of unfamiliar people with cruel designs. True to the genre, in this case, such an episode is sparked by a public conversation they have at the fair regarding Veronica's appointment at the clinic in Albuquerque. Overheard by a seemingly benevolent couple who offer to give them a ride for the remainder of their trip, Veronica and Bailey naively fall into their trap only to realize that the Christian couple (two stridently parodied pro-lifers whom Bailey aptly calls "Karen and Mike Pence," played by Breckin Meyer and Sugar Lyn Beard) have in fact planned to thwart their efforts at getting the procedure for Veronica. With Bailey one more time humorously concluding that "this is why you always choose the ride from the hot lesbian," the two young women get involved in a car chase, followed by the couple's family van which carries a giant inflatable baby's head on its front. Thus, the two heroines are both literally and symbolically trying to lose a (would-be) baby. The chase also becomes the pretext for another bit of genre self-referentiality, as the protagonists envision themselves as the two outlaws Thelma and Louise, especially when they reach what appears to be a ravine and wonder whether they will be forced to jump over it.

Once again overcoming the challenge set in their way, they manage to lose the villainous anti-abortionists by conveniently faking their own deaths, only to find themselves in the middle of nowhere, with no car, no water or food, and no telephone signal. At this very low point in their journey, Veronica's criticism of the legal system which allows for young women such as herself to travel hundreds of miles away from home in order to exercise control over their own bodies becomes more targeted and scathing:

> This is a joke. I shouldn't be here! I should be able to just walk down the street and open a door and waltz right in and say: 'Hello, my name is Veronica. My boyfriend is an asshole. Here's my $500. Oh, oh, yes, I would love a cup of water, thank you so much. That's so sweet of you.' But no. Nope! Instead, I literally had to drive 996 miles and now I'm

> stranded in this freaking field in the middle of nowhere. Why in the hell do you need parental consent to have an abortion, but not to actually birth a human child? F*** you, Missouri state legislature! (*Unpregnant*)

Fortunately, their despair is short-lived when they happen upon a mechanic shop run by Bob (cameo role by Giancarlo Esposito), a profoundly anti-government survivalist sick of "big government telling people what they can and cannot do with their bodies" (*Unpregnant*). Exemplifying the travel narrative's chance encounter that serves to bring the journey back on its tracks, Bob's dissenter figure plays a purely instrumental role, sometimes ascribed to marginal males in mobility stories: he helps the young women out on the last leg of their journey, somewhat like *NRSA*'s Jasper. In this case, it is by giving them a ride to the Albuquerque clinic in one of his old limousines, which prompts another of Bailey's quips–that "some people take a limo to prom, we take it to an abortion" (*Unpregnant*). While the limo trip is not itself without challenge (as close relationships never are), Veronica manages to keep her appointment. Her admittance to the clinic and the abortion scene at the end of the movie turn out to be the most calming part of this fast-paced, loud, raunchy script. The procedure is described clinically, and there is a visual representation of what each step involves for Veronica, in high contrast to the chaos and the unpredictability experienced by the 17-year-olds on their way to receiving healthcare. Which once again aims to show that the abortion procedure itself is not difficult, what is difficult is getting there.

The recent release of these two coming-of-age stories representing abortion mobility for the silver screen was applauded by supporters of the pro-choice movement and activists for women's rights, but it has also led to concerns that more teenagers may be prompted to undergo the procedure as a consequence. This feels reminiscent of comments in the aftermath of *Thelma and Louise*, only that back then the fear was apparently that "the women of America [will be moved] into flinging off their aprons, stowing the hubby's .38 in the diaper bag, pumping premium into the Country Squire and careening down the blue-line highways toward riot and mayhem, leaving behind a trail of dead men" (Morrison qtd. in Cohan and Hark 11). Controversy, but not always violence and

disorder, seems to follow women on the road. Indeed, the two movies emphasize precisely how difficult it is for underage women to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in the safe environment of a medical institution under the law of many states in the Union. However, as Seth Kreimer observes, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution allows for "a legal landscape in which a state's sovereignty [is] limited to its own borders" and establishes a "supervening national citizenship which guarantee[s] the right to travel and to take advantage of the legal entitlements of neighboring jurisdictions" (462). The American legal system is not one "in which citizens carry home-state law with them as they travel, like escaped prisoners dragging a ball and chain" (Kreimer 463), but one that ultimately enables various forms of mobility. These opportunities for movement and mobility within and without the law have become the vehicles for cultural critique with respect to the issue of abortion in the two cinematic representations under scrutiny here.

Concomitantly, both *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant* serve to amplify the voices of (young) people having abortions by shedding light on this reality in order to normalize and destigmatize the conversation about it. As my essay has tried to show, in the fictional imagination, this conversation can take different guises–that of a low-key drama or of a loud comedy, for example –, as no medium should be out of bounds in approaching abortion when the alternative is keeping silent. Author and activist Lindy West observed that "we are conditioned to speak about abortion with reverence and a bit of melancholy, if we speak about it at all" (9), whereas Amelia Bonow, author of the influential *Shout Your Abortion* (2018), notes that this topic "has been conspicuously avoided in art, literature, and in the conversations we have with the people we love." Consequently, many fail to understand what it is and how it works, as "our collective perception lacks human touchstones, and people do not find empathy in theoretical exercises" (Bonow). Along the same lines, Dahiana Belfiori, Argentinian feminist activist and author of *Código Rosa. Relatos sobre abortos* [Pink Code. Narratives about Abortions] (2015) maintains that "[abortion] stories are even stronger than many of the arguments we feminists use when advocating for it." Belfiori insists that "when experience is

articulated into fiction, the result is a powerful discourse with which to address complex issues, contributing to dismantling prejudices and allowing more voices to emerge" (qtd. in de Cicco). Because abortion is a subject that seems to almost inescapably render people uncomfortable, talking about it and showing it openly on screen works to erase the stigma. This openness may help counteract what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann famously termed the 'spiral of silence,' as the recurrent representation of abortion amplifies space in the media and thus proves that it is not and should not be something lived in isolation.

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