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The Abortion Road Trip Film and the Pronatalist Discourse in the Post-*Roe v. Wade* US

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ABSTRACT

With the overturn of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, which protected the constitutional right to abortion for almost 50 years, women in America are now faced with extreme difficulties when seeking an abortion. Given this dramatic pronatalist shift that seems only to be getting worse, more and more women will now have to travel through "abortion deserts" in order to seek safe and legal abortion care. Cinema has sought to mediate the troubles and struggles of women "on the road" to safe abortion. Thus, in recent years, we have watched a surge in the representation of abortion within the realm of the road-trip film genre in US-American cinema. Since 2015, several films, such as *Grandma* (2015), *Little Woods* (2018), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021), have tackled this issue. Interestingly, only one of those films was directed/written by a male individual, highlighting the way female filmmakers are currently reshaping reproductive health narratives. Additionally, three of these films, namely *Grandma*, *Unpregnant*, and *Plan B*, also fall under the comedy-drama genre, particularly the road trip-buddy comedy genre. This paper aims to explore how the road-trip film genre, which has featured predominantly male characters, is now helping women to share their stories and gain more visibility regarding reproductive rights and how comedy is being used to subvert the overtly dramatic representation of abortion that enhances the pronatalist ideology in most film and television narratives.

KEYWORDS

Abortion, childfree women, abortion comedy, abortion road trip, pronatalism, reproductive health care, abortion deserts, female filmmakers

An 18-year-old girl in Los Angeles visits her grandmother to ask for money in order to cover the cost of her abortion. A single mother in North Dakota embarks on a road trip to Canada with her older sister to have a legal abortion. A 17-year-old girl in Pennsylvania finds out she is pregnant but cannot have an abortion without parental consent unless she travels to New York. Another 17-year-old girl in Missouri faces the same problem and has no other option than to travel to Albuquerque to have a safe and legal abortion. A high school student from South Dakota is in search of the morning-after pill, which she is denied at the local pharmacy due to the conscience clause, and embarks on a road trip to the nearest Planned Parenthood facility. These are all young females who live in the contemporary US and are faced with limited or non-existent abortion access and reproductive healthcare. More importantly, these are all film characters that might as well be real people.

The common ground that lies underneath all the above narratives is that these abortion stories have now shifted away from the dilemma of whether or not to have an abortion to the immense barriers women face when seeking safe and legal abortion healthcare. What also ties these film narratives together is the fact that the road trip here is not depicted as a mere option but as an absolute necessity. In 2015, Paul Weitz's film *Grandma* became the first film to interlace the already established road trip film genre with the issue of abortion access. Following that, the films *Little Woods* (2019), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021) formed what is now hailed in public discourse as the "Abortion Road Trip Movie" (Colangelo). The present article aims to establish the genre of the abortion road trip film by examining what these recent film representations add to the long history of abortion narratives, how the road trip genre has evolved in order to accommodate more abortion stories, how comedy functions as a destigmatizing agent for such narratives, and finally the ways the pronatalist ideology can still be detected within these stories.

Before delving into this discussion, it is important to examine how abortion narratives first appeared in early US American cinema. Kat Sachs highlights that "cinema's formative years coincided with the spread of anti-abortion legislation across the country" (Sachs) as, according to Planned Parenthood, by 1910, abortion was completely illegal with very few exceptions in all states of the US. However, this does not seem to have impeded filmmakers from commenting on abortion legislation through their work as early as the 1910s. In 1916, Lois Weber co-wrote and co-directed (with her husband, Phillips Smalley) *Where Are My Children?*, one of the first silent movies in US-American film history dealing with abortion and women's reproductive rights. The film begins as a prominent district attorney prosecutes a doctor who has been providing women with illegal abortions. When the attorney finds out that his wife is

also among the women who have visited the doctor repeatedly to obtain an abortion, he confronts her by furiously exclaiming the titular phrase of the film, "where are my children?" (00:56:55). Birth control and abortion lie at the center of the film but in a pronatalist manner that renders the film's message problematic. As Shelley Stamp argues, the film presents abortion "as the selfish, unilateral decision of spoiled society wives unwilling to let pregnancy or motherhood curtail their social calendars" (273). In *Where Are My Children?* birth control and abortion do not necessarily reflect "pregnancy prevention per se" but "family planning," which is deeply rooted in the theory of eugenics (275). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is one of the first films to tackle birth control and abortion access when abortion was still illegal and to acknowledge the desire of women to remain voluntarily childfree. The following year, Weber and her husband wrote, directed, and starred in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1917). The film was released in the midst of a controversy around contraception and was based on the real-life activist Margaret Sanger, who advocated in favor of birth control (Sloan 341). The same year, Frank Beal's film *The Curse of Eve* (1917) was released, whose main female character has an abortion. A year after its release, the film was considerably re-edited so that the medi-cal procedure was not specified as an abortion, and it was then re-released under the name *Mother, I Need You*.

In the following decades, onscreen abortion had to overcome another significant obstacle. The Motion Picture Production Code (Hays Code), Hollywood's self-imposed censorship system that was established in 1930, made it almost impossible for creators to integrate an abortion plotline into their stories, even though, as Sachs highlights, abortion was not explicitly included in the Code (Sachs). However, some filmmakers defied censorship and public commentary and chose to at least insinuate abortion practices. *Men in White* (1934) was one of the first abortion films to cause a public uproar because it followed the story of a woman whose health is in great danger following an illegal abortion. As David Kirby observes, the film was also one of the main reasons for the formation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), which was responsible for the enforcement of the Hays Code after 1934 (468). However, still without any particular mention of abortion within the Hays Code, maintaining a coherent stance towards abortion plotlines in cinema proved to be a challenging task for the PCA (469). The key to the release and distribution of the films that included abortions was vagueness and narrative ambiguity, i.e., the abortion was never explicitly referred to or portrayed. This is how films such as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *The Doctor and the Girl* (1949) made their way to the movie the-aters. Still, most of these representations were usually aimed at condemning the deviant, immoral women who sought illegal abortions. This kind of representation left its

imprint on the history of abortion in film, which proved difficult to overcome in the following decades, even after the legalization of abortion in 1973. In fact, both film and television struggled to come up with new ways to accommodate abortion stories and portray the difficulties in accessing safe and legal reproductive healthcare.

To this day, there is still an ongoing, heated political debate around abortion access. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his conservative administration allowed for harsher attacks on women's bodily autonomy, as more and more states across the US imposed barriers on their access to abortion. Unfortunately, these continuous attacks against reproductive health rights culminated on June 24, 2022, with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Since the beginning of this post-*Roe* era, according to data by Planned Parenthood, at least twelve states have enacted a complete ban on abortions, thus rendering them illegal, while 32 states have banned abortion after a specified period during pregnancy. That translates to more than 36 million women of reproductive age who no longer have access to safe and legal reproductive health care (Planned Parenthood). The re-criminalization of abortion strips bodily autonomy away from women and leads them back to "back-alley" alternatives, which were widely spread before *Roe v. Wade*, or extended travel across states for those who can afford it. It is true, however, that even before this most recent change in law, abortion was not accessible to everyone, even though it was – at least in theory – a constitutional right. In 2017, Alice F. Cartwright et al. conducted a systematic research across the US and found that there were 27 "abortion deserts" – 27 cities with more than 100,000 permanent residents from which women had to travel 100 miles or more to reach the closest abortion facility (9). The 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has made things even worse since it transformed entire regions of the country into abortion deserts. According to Marielle Kirstein et al., "66 clinics across 15 states have been forced to stop offering abortions . . ." (Kirstein et al.) within 100 days since the Supreme Court decision.

These continuous harrowing shifts in abortion legislation have found their way into the film world. There has been a slow but steady surge in film narratives that highlight the stark reality of women needing to navigate across abortion deserts in the contemporary US and spending money they do not have in order to obtain a safe and legal abortion. In *Grandma*, Elle (Lily Tomlin) is visited by her teenage granddaughter, Sage (Julia Garner), who has recently found out that she is pregnant and wants to have an abortion she cannot afford. The two women embark on a road trip in order to try and collect the money for Sage's abortion. According to B. J. Colangelo, it was *Grandma* that "introduced the Abortion Road Trip Movie to the mainstream." In their 2022 article, Olivia Engle and Cordelia Freeman discuss "abortion mobilities" as well as "how the road trip narrative conveys the experience of forced travel of

people for abortions in the US" (298). They draw on examples of road trip narratives both from film and novels to examine if and how the medium affects the representation and consider the abortion road trip a "recent narrative device" (2). Raluca Andreescu analyzes the changing depictions of abortions in film and television and focuses specifically on two films – the drama *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and the more comedic *Unpregnant* (2021) (121). She examines the role genre plays in these representations and points out that teenage abortion stories are often closely linked with mobility (124).

The abortion road trip film has also received increasing attention in popular film criticism that frequently celebrates its significance to the pro-choice movement. Kayla Kumari Upadhyaya notes, in reference to the aforementioned films, that "while the abortion road trip trend may be a symptom of Americans' growing concern around limited abortion access, depicting it in a realistic and responsible way can help bring awareness to the issue too." As for the question of whether it should be thought of as a sub-genre or a film trope, she observes that "an 'abortion road trip' isn't so much a trope as it is a dark reality of American healthcare . . ." (Upadhyaya). Emily Clark considers the abortion road trip film a genre that "attempts to remove the stigma surrounding abortion and paint it as something to be celebrated, not mourned" (Clark). Kylie Cheung concludes that there is "a growing trend of movies in which seeking abortion or other reproductive care through tremendous cost, geographical and legislative barriers isn't just a subplot – it's the main storyline" (Cheung), while Kristina Deffenbacher also discusses how these narratives subvert the "generic expectations" of road trip films, in which, up until now, female characters had almost no agency (Deffenbacher). Overall, as sociologist Gretchen Sisson notes, "there's a much greater range of characters getting abortions across a greater range of genres" (qtd. in Haynes). Essentially, the basic narrative structure of road trip films has not really changed. Film characters still sit behind the wheel, usually with another person seated next to them, and together they travel long distances for a specific purpose while facing a number of obstacles and challenges along the way. The major shift that has taken place is that the US-American road trip film is now even more willing to put women behind the wheel, following the paradigm of the breakthrough film *Thelma & Louise* (1991). By now, these films have gradually become the means to explore not only the abortion stories of long-repressed female characters, but also the different parameters that determine a woman's abortion experience, such as age, race, and financial stability. However, those fictional depictions of women who choose to obtain an abortion and thus remain voluntarily childfree are still affected by the existing pronatalist ideology that is evident across film and

television. As Shari Roberts argues, "the masculinist genre of the road film works to limit the solutions for the female protagonists" (66).

However, it is still important to look for the roots of the road trip film, which can easily be found in the literary world, in novels and non-fiction books interested in traveling and voyaging around the world. As David Laderman explains, the road narrative has a long filmic as well as literary history and saw great success, particularly after World War II ("What a Trip" 42). For example, Jack Kerouac's 1955 novel *On the Road* is thought of as the quintessential road narrative in US-American culture, which shaped a distinct category of US-American road trip films that appeared in the late 1960s (42). The road trip film has also been considered inherently US-American and an essentially male genre for decades. It was established as a distinct genre also in post-war America, since it combined the ever-evolving automobile manufacturing system in the US with the unquenchable desire for freedom (Laderman, *Driving Visions* 38). This was, as Michalis Kokonis explains, a result of "the dissolution of the homogenized audience in the post-war years [that] brought about the differentiation of the Hollywood product" (178). Located within what was in retrospect called "the Hollywood Renaissance" in the late 1960s and 1970s, the road trip film, just like the already established western, placed masculine figures at the center in order to highlight "men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity" (Tompkins 45).

Through popular films such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), and *Badlands* (1973), the road trip film became closely linked with strong, masculine figures, who act as the main agents in those narratives and are able to disregard traditional social values and the status quo. In these films, as Laderman observes, female characters usually act as accomplices or mere distractions from the protagonist's main goal, which is ultimately his freedom ("What a Trip" 42). Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma & Louise* reintroduced the road trip film by focusing on the adventure of two female characters. That was a breakthrough moment for the genre, as the director "took the classic formula of the road narrative and infused it with feminist social critique" (Andreescu 125). However, even in those rare cases where the road trip film placed the spotlight on women, Roberts observes that "while male protagonists use the road to flee femininity, women cannot similarly flee the masculine because of the gendered assumptions of the genre" (62).

Since the road narrative stands as an integral part of US-American culture that has the ability to challenge the already established values in a non-conformist manner, it should be no surprise that it also became a powerful tool in the hands of filmmakers for the representation of abortion stories. Except *Little Woods*, all films discussed here begin with a teenage girl protagonist finding out about or suspecting an unexpected pregnancy: eighteen-year-old Sage (Julia Garner) in *Grandma*, seventeen-year-old

Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, seventeen-year-old Veronica (Haley Lu Richardson) in *Unpregnant*, and high school student Sunny (Kuhoo Verma) in *Plan B*. Sage appears at her grandmother's doorstep having already booked her appointment for her abortion, while Autumn, Veronica, and Sunny immediately start researching their abortion options nearby, making it clear from the very beginning that they want to remain childfree at this point in their lives. Soon afterward, they all conclude that they will need to travel in order to be able to obtain an abortion. Sage needs to travel because neither she nor her grandmother, to whom she turns for financial support, has the money to cover the costs of the procedure. So, they embark on a road trip to visit some of her grandmother's old friends and raise the money they need. Autumn finds out that she cannot have an abortion in her home state without a parent's consent, so she decides to travel to New York. Similarly, Veronica finds out that in Missouri abortions are forbidden without parental consent, so she needs to go to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Finally, Sunny, in fear of being pregnant, decides to get a morning-after pill, only to find out that pharmacists can deny selling this or any other birth-control pill if doing so goes against their moral conscience. As a result, Sunny's only solution is to travel to the nearest Planned Parenthood clinic, where she will be able to get a morning-after pill. What differentiates *Little Woods* from the above narratives is the fact that the abortion journey is an important part of the film but not its main narrative arc. Deb (Lily James) informs her sister Ollie (Tessa Thompson), who is the protagonist of the story, that she is pregnant with her second child. Deb is a single mother working as a waitress when she finds out about the five-figure cost of the prenatal care she will need if she decides to continue her pregnancy. It is at this moment that she realizes she needs to terminate her pregnancy and shares her decision with her sister. The two women travel together from North Dakota to Canada in order for Deb to obtain a safe and legal abortion.

Another significant detail that brings all these stories together is the fact that each of these female heroines in search of an abortion finds comfort in the presence of another woman. Sage starts a road trip with her grandmother, Autumn travels with her female cousin, Veronica and Sunny share their journey with their female best friend, and Deb travels with her sister. Like most male-dominated road trip movies, abortion road trip films are also buddy films but female characters are portrayed very differently. As Melanie Leigh Nash observes, in the buddy films of the 1960s and onwards, women are usually put in the margins of the stories, and sometimes they are even abused, since they stand "as representatives of the social rigidity which the buddies . . . have come to resent" (30). However, female characters in abortion road trip films have the opportunity to reclaim their space and "challenge masculine,

direction-less journeys" that were considered the norm within the road trip genre (Engle and Freeman 298) since these women's journeys have the specific purpose to enable the women to regain control over their own bodies by terminating an unwanted pregnancy. However, this re-imagining of the genre does not come without cost for these women, who repeatedly face various obstacles throughout their journeys. As Laderman observes, in male-driven narratives, those obstacles impede men from breaking free from all societal barriers and finding their true identity outside of traditional conventions ("What a Trip" 47). However, in the abortion road trip film, those obstacles can easily be translated as attacks on women's bodily autonomy and female reproductive rights.

In *Grandma*, Sage and Elle visit Elle's ex-husband to ask for the money needed for the abortion but he denies their request. Veronica and Bailey in *Unpregnant* meet a young couple that offers them a ride to Albuquerque but turn out to be pro-lifers who want to dissuade her from having the abortion. While trying to escape, a car chase is initiated, which becomes the "pretext for [a] bit of genre self-referentiality, as the protagonists envision themselves as the two outlaws Thelma and Louise . . ." (Andreescu 133). In *Plan B*, Sunny, after having unprotected sex, visits the nearest drugstore to buy the Plan B pill. However, she is met with the pharmacist's denial to sell her the pill, since that would go against his personal conviction. As he explains with his mannered condescending smile: "It's a little thing called the conscience clause. Any medical professional in the great state of South Dakota can refuse to sell birth control drugs to someone if it goes against their beliefs" (*Plan B* 00:30:07–17). Through these instances, the abortion road trip genre highlights the fact that women are confronted not only with practical challenges in their decision to remain childfree, such as travel expenses, but also with the dissenting opinions of others around them.

Interestingly, three out of the five films discussed here, namely *Grandma*, *Unpregnant,* and *Plan B*, explore contraception, abortion, and reproductive health rights through a comedic lens. Until recently, dramatic film representations were at the helm of abortion stories by portraying abortion decision-making as a life-changing event in a woman's life. While television saw some of the most significant humorous portrayals of abortion on screen, beginning with the sitcom *Maude* (CBS, 1972–1978), which, according to Lewis Beale, featured one of the first abortion stories on television, the film world was still hesitant to deal with this rather heated and controversial subject in a more comedic manner.

Juno (2007) still stands as a representative example of a film that attempted to shake things up and portray abortion as a human right. When 16-year-old Juno finds out that she is pregnant, she calls her best friend and they immediately discuss *where* she would have her abortion and not *if* she is going to have one. Therefore, *Juno*

initially appears to be one of the first films to normalize having an abortion, only to rather quickly return to conservatism by having Juno choose to have the baby and give it up to adoption after all. As Pamela Thoma argues, *Juno* reveals a "commercialization of motherhood" partly since abortion is portrayed "as a 'bad' consumer choice" (415–16). The film spends little time weighing the notion of having an abortion and focuses mostly on Juno's quest to find the perfect mother. Nonetheless, *Juno* paved the way for other comedies that dealt with abortion in a more progressive manner.

Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child* (2014) was the first film that used humor to tell an abortion story. Donna (Jenny Slate), the main character of the film, is introduced to the audience as a 28-year-old stand-up comedian whose boyfriend (Paul Briganti) has just broken up with her. Later that night, heartbroken by the turn of events, she meets Max (Jake Lacy) at the bar and has a one-night stand with him. After a few weeks, Donna finds out that she is pregnant and soon after visits a Planned Parenthood clinic to schedule her abortion. By the end of the film, it becomes clear that Donna obtained a successful abortion and feels relieved. In other words, unlike Juno, Donna actually goes through with the abortion and this is not portrayed as something particularly dramatic nor does she regret her decision by the end of the film.

Film critics considered *Obvious Child* a "progressive" (Lyttelton), "refreshing" (Debruge), and "stigma-free movie" (Dry) and it quickly gave rise to the question: "Can abortion be funny?" (Lipsitz). Interestingly, even in those rare cases of abortion comedy in film or television, women are not portrayed as choosing an abortion lightly, even though, as Jenny Singer notes, abortion is way too common nowadays to be so dramatically portrayed through fictional narratives. Therefore, it is notable that "[t]here is no mainstream comedy movie that laughs gleefully at the personal and often very painful decision that one out of every four women will make in her lifetime to have an abortion" (Singer). Even this limited, yet significant group of films that can fall under the label of abortion road trip comedies, and belong to a larger abortion comedy category, are evidence of the fact that now more than ever filmmakers want to provide the audience with a different take on abortion stories. Rachel Lee Goldenberg, director of *Unpregnant*, commented on her decision to portray abortion through comedy and highlighted that:

> So some of the criticism that we're making fun of abortion or laughing at abortion is sort of bad faith because that's not actually where any humor is coming from. The comedy that is coming from this journey is pointing out the difficulty, which I'm completely comfortable criticizing. (qtd. in Garcia-Navarro)

Whether it is the abortion procedure that is thoroughly explained in one of the most memorable scenes in *Unpregnant*, or contraception and access to the morning-after pill, as it is portrayed in *Plan B*, filmmakers are now embracing witty humor, which has the power to "undermine the authority of misogyny and sexism in constructing cultural narratives about women who have abortions" (Lane-McKinley) while at the same time highlighting and embracing the absurdity of all these obstacles. In other words, despite the fact that those narratives rely on the familiarity with the already established and well-known genres, such as the road trip film, comedies, and the rom-com, they aim, as Melissa Hair highlights, to challenge the viewers' perspective on reproductive politics (386). Both *Unpregnant* and *Plan B* were released after the country had already started watching continuous attacks on women's reproductive health rights, such as the Targeted Restriction of Abortion Provider (TRAP) laws enacted in Utah and Indiana in March 2020, or Florida's parental consent law that was put in effect in July 2020 (Ellmann). In fact, Jenni Hendriks, the author of the titular novel on which *Unpregnant* is based, was inspired to write that story due to her own dismay when she found out about the 72-hour waiting period that was imposed in South Dakota in 2011 for any person wishing to get an abortion (Roshell).

A pivotal moment occurs in *Unpregnant* when Veronica appears to be completely fed up with all the challenges she and Bailey have faced on their journey to the closest clinic in Albuquerque where parental consent is not a requirement for minors who wish to obtain an abortion, and she finally exclaims:

> 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 dollars. 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? Fuck you, Missouri State Legislature! (01:06:36–07:46)

The humor in these cases seems to act as a cultural and political commentary against the backdrop of the Trump administration in the US and the pronatalist discourse embedded in it. So, it is safe to say that the comedic nature of these films not only serves to amplify the voices of young women who desire to have an abortion and/or remain childfree, but also portray, as Hair observes, the experience of being a woman in the contemporary US-American political and cultural landscape (386).

One of the exceptions among this corpus of selected films and the newly formed canon of abortion road trip comedies is *Little Woods*. While being a road movie, *Little Woods* does not deal with the subject of abortion humorously. It is a female-centered film that highlights how the rise of anti-choice legislation during the Trump administration affected particularly women in North Dakota, one of the six US states with

only one abortion clinic (Jones et al. 134). Ollie is a woman of color whose probation is about to end after being incarcerated for dealing opioids, while her half-sister Deb lives in a trailer with her son and becomes pregnant by her abusive boyfriend. After Deb asks for Ollie's help in order to have an abortion, both women face enormous obstacles. *Little Woods* explores the limitations of the comedic mode and reveals that a film that deals not only with abortion bans but also the opioid crisis, poverty, race inequality, domestic abuse, and family relationships, cannot so easily rely on humor to tell a story. However, regardless of whether films choose a humorous depiction of the abortion issue or not, they reveal the exact same sentiment: a feeling of desperation on the part of women when they want to be in control of their own bodies but are denied that basic right.

What all these recent films discussed above show is that the focus of the narratives has shifted away from the discussion of whether or not to have an abortion and the trauma and regret of having had an abortion to the difficulties in obtaining one. Ollie never questions her sister's need and desire to have an abortion. Sage's grandmother is not interested in how or why her pregnancy occurred and immediately embraces her decision to have an abortion. When she finds out about Autumn's pregnancy, Autumn's cousin, Skylar, steals some cash from the grocery store she works at in order to buy bus tickets to New York for her and Autumn. Veronica's friend Bailey, as soon as she realizes her now estranged best friend is pregnant, offers to drive her to the nearest abortion clinic. Sunny, after realizing she will not be able to buy the morning-after pill at her local pharmacy, follows Lupe suggestion, and the two of them set off for the nearest Planned Parenthood facility. The overly dramatic representation of a woman's interior conflicts regarding the decision to have an abortion has now given place to external conflicts, such as restrictive abortion laws, the cost of the procedure, and the lack of trusted healthcare providers and organizations that promote and protect reproductive health rights. The comedic portrayals and the trope of the abortion road trip in general have contributed significantly to the effort to strip abortion of its stigma and provide a more realistic depiction of abortion nowadays.

The abortion road trip film has created a space for filmmakers to experiment with the conventions of abortion narratives by redirecting the focus of their films to the journey and the familial or friendship relationships between the female heroines, and not the decision-making around abortion or the procedure itself. However, the films highlighting the significance of solidarity and understanding between female characters can also obscure the very systemic problems these films seem to want to address. As Stephanie Herold et al. argue, "over-emphasizing the value of interpersonal support may take focus from the real legal, social, and cultural barriers that women

seeking abortions face" (944). Furthermore, even though these films offer a more nuanced depiction of the abortion issue than their predecessors, they still perpetuate certain stereotypes to the detriment of abortion reality for a lot of women in the US. *Grandma*, *Little Woods*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, *Unpregnant*, and *Plan B*, each in its own way, "unintentionally obscure the demographics of people who seek abortions" (Singer) resulting in the misrepresentation of who is more impacted by the current abortion legislation. The most common demographic discrepancy is the fact that most abortion road trip films feature white female characters seeking an abortion, even though, according to Jenna Jerman et al., the majority of actual abortion patients in the US are people of color (6). The overrepresentation of white women in these narratives seems to continue the decades-long tradition of US-American road trip films, which almost all focused on white characters (Engle and Freeman 308). In fact, *Little Woods* and *Plan B* are the only of these films to feature women of color, although they constitute the demographic that is disproportionately affected by the racial injustices when seeking reproductive care. However, even when the character seeking an abortion is a person of color, Herold et al. observe that onscreen abortion depictions usually fail to address the challenges that systemic racism poses for non-white people of reproductive age (934). Furthermore, only *Little Woods* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* truly touch upon the financial barriers to abortion healthcare and "the economics of owning your own body" (Da Costa) by portraying female characters who do not have the means to have a safe and legal abortion, when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. While *Grandma*, too, features a female character who cannot afford an abortion, Sage is still depicted, as Hair observes, as a middle-class young woman from a highly educated family, who has the privilege of asking one of her family members for financial aid (392).

What is also underrepresented in abortion road trip films is the medication abortion. Among the five films discussed here, Sunny in *Plan B* is the only character to not seek a surgical abortion. However, she does not have or want a medical abortion either but, in fear of being pregnant, tries to have access to emergency contraception. Filmmakers showcase a certain preference for surgical abortion in films, even though medication abortion accounted for 53% of all US abortions in 2020 (Jones et al. 136). Of course, this narrative choice also has its upsides. For one, it allows viewers to witness the harsh realities that surround many abortion clinics in the US and explore "the impact of the zealous anti-choice movement in varying tones and degrees" (Upadhyaya). In *Grandma*, *Little Woods*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, and *Unpregnant*, the female protagonists come across anti-choice protesters that usually stand outside the abortion clinic. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* actually depicts a so-called crisis pregnancy center. They intentionally appear to be an abortion clinic but

are really a front for anti-abortion activists. For another, it lets filmmakers include an authentic depiction of an abortion procedure by actually entering the procedure room and placing the focus on the character's state of mind. In *Unpregnant*, a medical staff member describes the whole procedure step by step in order to put Veronica's mind at ease. What makes this scene particularly compelling is the way the preparatory process and the actual procedure are depicted step by step in a calm manner as the physician explains everything in an unexcited voice-over narration (*Unpregnant* 01:30:19–32:10). The certainty and peacefulness of the physician's voice stand in stark contrast with the previous chaotic unfolding of events in the film. As Andreescu highlights, this "aims to show that the abortion procedure itself is not difficult, what is difficult is getting there" (134). Both Autumn in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and Veronica in *Unpregnant* experience a quiet moment within the four walls of the surgical suite and among the medical practitioners around them. As is to be expected, the two women look stressed before the procedure begins but they stand by their choice and do not back out of their decision to obtain an abortion.

Finally, what all these five films have in common (and share with many filmic depictions of abortions since they first appeared in the film world) is the fact that the female characters who decide to have an abortion are either teenage girls or young women. Thus, the number of obstacles they face in their attempt to access a safe and legal abortion is depicted as a result of their own irresponsibility caused by their young age rather than the legal and medical system that has failed to support them. As Lane-McKinley points out, "the figure of the pregnant white teenager, in this sense, distracts from the correlation between abortion and poverty, and the reality that six out of ten women who have an abortion already have at least one child." Indeed, this observation reveals another significant factor that is commonly ignored or underrepresented in onscreen portrayals of abortion. Among the five films discussed here, Deb in *Little Woods* is the only character that is already a parent. Meanwhile, data shows that in the US more than 59% of abortions are obtained by women who have given birth at least once in their lifetime (Jerman et. al 6).

These discrepancies across race, class, and age between abortion road trip films and real data continue to make it difficult for viewers, especially female audiences, to relate to these fictional characters. In fact, it becomes even more challenging to define whether those inaccuracies serve the purpose of constructive criticism against the current wrongdoings in reproductive health care, or if they simply perpetuate the pronatalist ideology that has been in place for so many decades. Nonetheless, the abortion road trip film is extremely timely since abortion rights in the US are again under increasing attack. It has also provided the opportunity for a number of different genres, such as comedy, romantic comedy, road movie, and buddy film, to inter-

sect and interact with each other. Through its engagement with a number of problems and challenges of our era, the road trip film has evolved in order to accommodate more diverse and relevant narratives. At the same time, an abortion film renaissance took place, just as *Roe*'s vulnerability became evident in the eyes of filmmakers. Consequently, the abortion decision-making process is not necessarily the central narrative arc anymore. Each plot of the films discussed here focuses on the political and legal challenges women face when attempting to access reproductive healthcare in the US. These five abortion road trip films ultimately act as counter-narratives to earlier representations of abortion on screen and contribute to the formation of a general consensus, which requires narratives that do not validate the taboo around abortion choice and abortion discussion, but instead normalize and destigmatize abortion. Nonetheless, filmmakers still have a long way to go in order to be able to rid their stories of the dominant pronatalist ideology that keeps re-appearing due to the current sociopolitical circumstances. Even more than that, the political landscape needs to transform in ways that a zip code will no longer determine a woman's access to reproductive health care.

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