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**‘All this way, all this money, for a five-minute procedure’: Barriers, mobilities, and representation on the US abortion road trip**

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## **‘All this way, all this money, for a five-minute procedure’: Barriers, mobilities, and representation on the US abortion road trip**

The abortion road trip is a narrative device that has emerged in the last decade whereby the central plot of the story is the journey taken in search of an abortion. In this paper we analyze two young adult novels (*Unpregnant* and *Girls on the Verge*) and two films (*Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Grandma*) that follow adolescent girls traveling for abortions in the contemporary United States. Through the analysis of these four narratives, we argue that representations of the abortion road trip are novel for their focus on the barriers and politics of abortion access in the United States. While the representations do prioritize certain barriers over others, they mark an important shift in abortion discourse in popular culture. Instead of the ‘drama’ of the plot being the decision to have an abortion, it is increasingly other socio-politico-legal issues such as the lack of abortion clinics, the distance required to travel, legal rights for adolescents, the cost of the procedure, and the opinions of family and friends that take center stage. The focus on these structural, political barriers can help to educate audiences about the realities of abortion access in the US and move abortion discourse beyond the individual.

Keywords: abortion; road trip; viapolitics; mobilities; culture; media

Word count: 9655

## **Introduction**

The politicization and persistent legislation of abortion in the United States is restricting access and forcing abortion seekers to travel increasing distances to access care (White et al. 2022). With the outbreak of COVID-19, the compounding effect of new legal restrictions, and challenges to the federal legal status of abortion at the US Supreme Court, necessary awareness is being called to the need for people to travel often significant distances and deal with additional burdens of travel to access an abortion. While such travel is not new, research continues to reveal the numerous travel-related barriers pregnant people face in accessing abortion and how they fall unevenly along racialized and class-based lines (Fuentes et al. 2016; Jerman et al. 2017). Alongside academic research, recent popular culture representations have drawn attention to the burden of abortion travel. While fictional representations of abortion have typically overlooked obstacles to abortion access (Sisson and Kimport 2017), including travel, recent ‘abortion road trip’ narratives illustrate the cruel and unusual burden that abortion travel can place on the shoulders of women and pregnant people.

Representations of abortion in popular culture play an important role in influencing people’s perceptions of what the procedure entails and who accesses abortions (Condit 1990; Freeman 2022; Sisson 2019; Sisson and Rowland 2017; Sisson and Kimport 2016a). The representation of abortion matters as it is a safe and necessary healthcare procedure that continues to be framed as a morally suspect ‘necessary evil’ by legislators and the public on ‘both sides’ of the abortion debate (Millar 2017). This frames abortion as a difficult choice and as a failure of normative expectations of motherhood and sexuality (ibid). Portrayals of abortion as dangerous and risky fuel stigma and leads people to believe that abortions are unsafe and have negative consequences (Bryant and Levi 2012). However, there has been a

notable increase in fictional plotlines across film, television, and novels that directly deal with abortion and do so in a way that shows abortion as a positive decision (Freeman 2022). ‘Positive’ abortion narratives are burgeoning across popular culture including the TV shows *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW*, and *Euphoria* and the recent films *Lingui*, *the Sacred Bonds* (2021), *Obvious Child* (2014) and *Saint Frances* (2019). This conscious decision to refuse to show abortion as a negative experience in a person’s life can be an important strategy in reducing abortion stigma (Thomsen 2013). Showing a diversity of abortion experiences, or what Millar (2017) terms ‘counter-narratives’, allows readers and viewers to understand the varied range of contexts in which people seek abortions.

While most research on the portrayal of abortions has focused on film and television, namely through ANISRH’s ongoing Abortion Onscreen project, we use four ‘abortion road trip’ narratives from film and novels as the subject of our analysis. The road trip is a narrative genre that has been researched in both film and literature (Archer 2016; Brigham 2015). Road narratives are not necessarily meant to be ‘true’, instead they are explored for their capacity for storytelling and for what being on the road represents more broadly (Archer 2017). In this paper, we examine how abortion decisions, barriers, travel, and emotions are represented through the ‘abortion road trip’ in *Girls on the Verge* (2019, novel), *Grandma* (2015, film), *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020, film), and *Unpregnant* (2019, novel). By studying the four together, we interrogate how the road trip narrative conveys the experience of forced travel of people for abortions in the US.

Through the analysis of the four narratives we argue that representations of the abortion road trip are novel for their focus on the barriers and politics of abortion access in the US. In order

to make this argument we first review the existing literature on abortion travel, road trip narratives, and viapolitics. We then follow the chronological journey of the four protagonists as they undergo their abortion road trip in three sections: beginning the journey, on the road, and arriving at the destination to have the abortion. In so doing this paper offers a new reading of road trip narratives as these representations all challenge masculine, directionless journeys and also contributes to mobilities scholarship through our use of viapolitics and our focus on abortion mobilities, both of which center politics and struggle. Finally, our paper offers the first analysis of this recent narrative device: the abortion road trip.

### **Mobilities: Abortions, Roads, and Viapolitics**

Reproductive mobilities, while only a recent area of analysis in the mobilities scholarship, has shown how intertwined movement and reproduction are (Speier, Lozanski and Frohlick 2020). However, this scholarship has focused predominantly on procreative travel rather than on travel to end pregnancies (see Murray and Khan 2020 and Freeman 2020 for exceptions). Abortion travel is necessary when the essential healthcare procedure is denied to people in their immediate surroundings (Calkin and Freeman 2019), and has occurred on a global scale since the 1960s (Sethna and Doull 2012). The ability to travel, however, is stratified and the burden of travel disproportionately falls on women who are young, poor, rural, indigenous, and/or people of color (Silva and McNeill 2008).

In the US, the spatial configuration of abortion care is such that the distance to abortion facilities can be an insurmountable barrier. This is especially true for those living in or around ‘abortion deserts’ (Cartwright et al. 2018) or in other rural and remote areas. However, there

are additional barriers for those without private transport, those with children, those with shift-work, and those who cannot afford the costs associated with travel (Doran and Hornibrook 2016; Gomez 2016; Statz and Pruitt 2019; Jerman et al. 2017). Abortion travel is a burden for many abortion-seekers, yet US jurisprudence suggests that distance to an abortion clinic does not constitute an ‘undue burden’ to care; abortion travel does not make abortion impossible—just inconvenient (Pruitt and Vanegas 2014; Statz and Pruitt 2019). Such barriers are unique to abortion. No other form of healthcare is treated and politicized in this way, giving rise to the term ‘abortion exceptionalism’ (Cohen and Joffe 2020).

Together, this scholarship makes up work on ‘abortion mobilities’, defined as ‘the movement and fixity of people and things that shape abortion access’ (Freeman 2020, 896). This scholarship has provided much-needed evidence of the realities and burdens of abortion travel, but lacks a focus on the experiences of those who undertake abortion journeys and the emotions bound up with abortion travel (Freeman 2020; Calkin and Freeman 2019).

Moreover, although scholarship on abortion travel has emphasized barriers to access, cultural representations of abortion have neglected the existence of these barriers. While a focus on people’s narratives of their own abortion travel and emotions is beyond the scope of this paper, representational mobilities shape ‘actual embodied experiences of mobility’ and enable understanding of what meanings are attached to movement (Schurr, 2019, 110).

Therefore, in this paper we examine the representational mobilities of abortion by exploring how films and novels that take the abortion road trip as their central premise *represent* experiences of abortion travel and barriers to safe and effective abortion access.

The road trip is a 'quintessential expression of Americanness' (Brigham 2015, 3). While it exists in cultural representations across the world (see Garibotto and Pérez 2016; Duarte and Corrigan 2018; Archer 2012) its frontier ethos and fixation on the car are tied to the mythology and social history of the US (Cohan and Hark 1997). Defining the boundaries of what is or is not a road narrative is no simple task (Morris 2003). While road trips feature in a variety of cultural forms, the road movie takes cultural precedence (Eyerman and Orvar 1995). There are wide variations in style and meaning between Hollywood and more experimental road movies (Boczkowska 2021), but the main element that sets road movies apart from other genres is their transgression of everyday norms (Archer 2017). Elsewhere, Archer (2016, 6, emphasis in original) has argued that '[w]hat binds all manifestations of the road movie is the idea of *mobility*'.

The American road trip imaginary has been shaped by the promise of mobility and its dual ability to take you anywhere but also to change who you are (Brigham 2015) and its mythology is bound up with ideas of restlessness, rebellion, and a rite of countercultural passage that has typically exalted masculinity and maleness (Laderman 1996). Women have traditionally been sidelined in road trip narratives and when they do appear they are distractions from the liberation of the journey (Laderman 1996). The presence of women on the road can problematize stereotypes of gendered domesticity (Clarke 2004), but female protagonists struggle to shake off domesticity and fail to receive the promise of liberation and transformation that men experience on the road (Brigham 2015). Our focus on adolescent girls and the abortion road trip therefore challenges the pervasive maleness of road trip narratives and associated scholarship.



In order to further this scholarship on the road trip, we draw on ‘viapolitics’, a concept that has not been used to analyze road trip narratives, nor any fictional representations to date. ‘Viapolitics’ was coined by William Walters (2015), a migration-focused political theorist, as a way to shift focus onto the role of vehicles, roads, and routes in migration politics. This approach is explicitly indebted to mobilities scholarship, particularly in how scholars have challenged sedentarist assumptions. Viapolitics refers to ‘when the space-time of travel and the vehicles enabling it become objects of tension and transformation, simultaneously a means through which people seek to move and a means through which their movement is governed’ (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022,7-8). Walters (2015) argues that by centering the ‘in-between’ it is possible to shift attention away from the state and better understand alternative sites of political action. Vehicles, roads and routes are not completely ignored in migration scholarship but they are rarely a central focus, and Walters (2016) uses examples such as deportation flights as a way in to broader discussions around borders, power, and justice. Viapolitical analyses have focused on empirical examples, but representations and imaginaries are crucial sites of study (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022).

While the vast majority of viapolitics scholarship has taken place within migration research, it was first used by Freeman (2020, 898) within abortion scholarship to explore the embodied and emotional experiences of abortion travel ‘as a way to cut through scale and understand abortion from the scale of the body to the global’. A viapolitical approach was then also taken up by Thomsen et al. (2022) in their work on mobile crisis pregnancy centers to show how these vehicles complicate celebrations of mobility. Given this nascent but generative use of viapolitics in abortion scholarship we extend this to our analysis of abortion road trip narratives to better attend to the practicalities of the abortion journeys undertaken by the four protagonists, particularly the vehicles they travel on, the roads they use, and the routes along

the way. We believe that this is a useful framework because while the word ‘mobility’ has positive connotations (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022), using ‘viapolitics’ brings struggle and politics to the center of our analysis.

### **The abortion road trip**

Drawing on the mobilities and viapolitics scholarship, in this section we analyze the following abortion road trip narratives from the beginning of the journey, on the road, and to the destination: the abortion clinic. First, we briefly introduce the four narratives:

- *Girls on the Verge* (2019) is a young adult novel by Sharon Biggs Waller. It follows Texan teen Camille’s journey to have an abortion without parental involvement, which has her unsuccessfully seek a judicial bypass, travel to Mexico for abortion pills which fail, and ultimately drive to New Mexico. She is driven to the abortion by an acquaintance and accompanied by her best friend.
- *Grandma* (2015) is a comedy-drama film written, directed and produced by Paul Weitz. It follows Californian teen Sage’s journey to raise funds for her abortion that afternoon. She is driven around and to the abortion by her grandmother.
- *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) drama film written and directed by Eliza Hittman. It follows Pennsylvanian teen Autumn’s journey to have a second-trimester abortion in New York City. She is accompanied on public transportation by her cousin.
- *Unpregnant* (2019) is a young adult novel by Jenni Hendricks and Ted Caplan. It follows Missourian 17-year-old Veronica’s journey to have an abortion without parental involvement, which requires a one-way trip of over 900 miles as she chooses not to request a judicial bypass. She is driven to the abortion by a former friend.

## ***Beginning the journey***

### *Deciding to have an abortion*

Before the abortion road trip can be undertaken, the characters become pregnant, discover the pregnancy, and ultimately decide to terminate the pregnancy. These aspects of the narrative demonstrate the ordinariness of abortion within a context of adolescent sexuality and differ from earlier representations of abortion whereby deciding to have an abortion is the central dramatic point of the abortion storyline (Sisson 2019). The vast majority of women feel that the decision to have an abortion was the correct one (Rocca et al. 2020) and, in these narratives there is little doubt in the girls' minds that they will have an abortion and that it is the right choice. Young women anticipate questions about and judgement of their sexual behavior and explain the circumstances of their pregnancy to frame their abortion as a 'good abortion' (Allen 2015; Jackson 2020). Abortion is 'the only possible and legitimate outcome' of the protagonists' pregnancies (Beynon-Jones 2017, 230).

Two protagonists (*Girls on the Verge, Grandma*) become pregnant through ordinary sexual encounters with boys their own age where contraceptives were not used or failed. These boys do not treat the girls admirably, but their behavior does not reach the level of male sexual violence we find in the other two narratives. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica's boyfriend intentionally pokes holes in the condom and it is heavily implied that Autumn's (*Never Rarely Sometimes Always*) pregnancy is a result of rape by an unidentified perpetrator. Abortion in cases of sexual assault is one of three 'therapeutic' circumstances in which abortion is generally permitted in restricted settings (Kulczycki 2014). These laws reinforce a hierarchy in which there are bad reasons for having an abortion and good ones – namely,

when the pregnancy is wanted but not viable or when sex was non-consensual. This makes abortion something extraordinary and heavily stigmatized despite being a common procedure (Watson 2018). Irrespective of this hierarchy, *Unpregnant* and *NRSA* highlight that sexual violence is an unfortunately common experience for women and girls and pregnancies may indeed result.

In combination with the circumstances in which the protagonists became pregnant, their life-stage considerations also predominate as 'good' reasons for having an abortion. Overall, these narratives fit in with the overrepresentation of white, young, and childfree protagonists whose abortion decisions are focused on their relative immaturity and future opportunities (Sisson and Kimport 2016a). This is particularly true of *GOTV*, *Unpregnant*, and *Grandma* in which having a child is depicted as something that would ruin the girls' lives. As Veronica in *Unpregnant* elaborates, '[t]here were a thousand miles between me and the only thing that could *salvage the remnants of my life*' (emphasis ours). This was less true in *NRSA* where Autumn's trajectory is unclear. Yet her story briefly brings out another of young women's abortion narratives: delayed motherhood. Girls do not reject motherhood but articulate plans to pursue it in the future (Beynon-Jones 2017; Hoggart 2017). By noting that now is not the 'right time' to have a child, girls are performing responsible motherhood (Hoggart 2017). Autumn explains that she is 'not ready to be a mom'.

### *Researching options*

Abortion does not happen in a vacuum. In a context in which abortion is politicized, stigmatized, and restricted, accessing abortion is not a straightforward process, particularly for minors who lack access to social and economic capital. Most states require minors to

notify or obtain the consent of at least one parent or adult guardian before accessing an abortion (Guttmacher Institute 2022). While it is possible to receive a judicial bypass that permits a minor to self-consent, the process is challenging, often inaccessible, lacks anonymity in rural communities, and is not a guarantee – not to mention time-consuming for a time-sensitive procedure time-sensitive (Hasselbacher and Truehart 2021). While Veronica and Autumn ultimately decide they do not have the time or resources to undertake a judicial bypass request, Camille manages to secure a hearing with an advocate from Jane’s Due Process (a real organization operating in Texas). The judge tells her that she has failed to show ‘good judgment’ by having sex with a man she was not in love with and describes abortion as ‘terrible’ and denies the request. Sisson and Kimport (2016a) observe that representations of abortion as a teenage ‘problem’ might build support for these restrictive laws. On the other hand, representations in *Unpregnant*, *NRSA*, and *GOTV* suggest it is parental notification laws that are themselves a teenage problem.

Another problem, though not an exclusively teenage one, are crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) and their efforts to prevent abortions. These organizations are often faith-based and well outnumber abortion-providing facilities in the US, even operating out of vehicles to increase their geographical reach (Thomsen 2022; Thomsen et al. 2022). They pose a public health risk, as Rosen (2012) argues, by providing misinformation that delays, interferes with, and prevents abortion and exercising undue influence over reproductive decision-making. Before requesting a judicial bypass, Camille (*GOTV*) attempts to procure an abortion at a CPC believing that it was a medical facility. Instead, she is told that the center is ‘here for mothers, not murderers’ and is provided pamphlets on the ‘side-effects’ of abortion. Autumn (*NRSA*) likewise obtains a free pregnancy test at a CPC, is provided an ultrasound upon a positive result, and is shown the film ‘Hard Truth’ when they discover Autumn is ‘abortion minded’.

At this juncture, the protagonists realize that they are unable to obtain an abortion locally without telling a parent. This is a huge and potentially insurmountable barrier to abortion for minors – the reality of which is not frequently portrayed in cultural representations of abortion (Sisson and Kimport 2017).

Ultimately, all conclude that they must go on an abortion road trip. Their forced travel is inherently politicized through the governance of abortion in their home states (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022). Veronica in *Unpregnant*, who lives in Missouri, is told by the receptionist at Planned Parenthood that the closest state in which she would not require parental consent is New Mexico – nearly 1,000 miles away. Autumn's (*NRSA*) closest potential clinic that would not require parental consent is in New York City – not as far geographically, but a significant undertaking for her without private transport. Camille in *GOTV*, who is befuddled by the incessant changes in Texas abortion law, receives a note from someone in court to obtain the abortion 'pill' on the Texas-Mexico border or in Mexico. Sage in *Grandma*, on the other hand, can obtain an abortion locally and has scheduled an appointment, but must undertake a road trip to get money to pay for the procedure as she has only US\$18 to her name. All are therefore forced to move, a far cry from footloose or liberatory road trip narratives.

The difficulties that these characters encounter just to find a clinic are staggering. Locating an abortion provider is not easy, as Cohen and Joffe (2020, 54) write, clinics are 'hard to find, harder to reach', but this barrier is not ultimately insurmountable for these protagonists. Sisson and Kimport (2017) observe that barriers in fictional abortion narratives rarely prevent characters from obtaining an abortion. However, we contend that, although the protagonists

ultimately obtain an abortion, the direct focus on barriers and the emotional and practical struggles the adolescent characters face, are unusual and provide important ‘counter-narratives’ (Millar 2017). These progressive narratives accurately reflect the realities of just how difficult access is or can be and this is important because narratives can both build empathy and inform audiences (Ryan et al. 2018).

### *Organizing logistics*

Getting to the provider is the next step and one that is not straightforward when the abortion-seeker must travel across (multiple) state lines. It has long been established that the further an individual lives from an abortion clinic the less likely they are to have an abortion (Bearak, Burke and Jones 2017). The closure of abortion clinics following restrictive laws, combined with regulations that restrict who can access existing clinics and in what way, serve to increase the physical and metaphysical distance between a pregnant adolescent and an abortion (Gerds et al., 2016). The protagonists know they need to get from A to B (and back) but struggle to figure out how without disclosing their abortion or having to pay high out-of-pocket costs; access to transport ‘is distributed unequally and contested’ (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022, 6). Veronica first opts for the Greyhound, but it would arrive too late for her appointment and flying is unaffordable. She therefore asks her old friend who has a car to take her. Likewise, an old acquaintance of Camille’s offers to take her by car to prevent her from having to take a Greyhound. Autumn and her cousin, on the other hand, do not have access to a private vehicle and do in fact take the Greyhound bus to New York City, which shapes their experience of the abortion road trip in different ways, as discussed below.

Money plays a central role in each of the narratives. Sisson and Kimport (2017) observe that abortion costs in fictional abortion narratives are generally focused on the cost of the procedure itself but, except in the case of *Grandma* where the abortion road trip is specifically to raise funds for the procedure, these narratives challenge this tendency. The costs of travel remain understudied in viapolitical and road trip analyses but it is a central plot-point particularly for the three protagonists undertaking out-of-state travel (*GOTV*, *Unpregnant*, *NRSA*). They must raise money to pay for transportation, accommodation, and food over the multiple days they will be away from home on top of the cost of the procedure. Veronica pawns an engagement ring, Camille spends her away-camp funds, and Autumn's cousin steals money from their work presumably because they have no savings. For Sage and Veronica, the cost does not fluctuate throughout the story, but it does for Camille and Autumn who have to get different procedures than originally intended. To account for this differential Autumn and her cousin have to sleep rough in the subway system and Camille and her friends raise money by busking.

Key to arranging the logistics of transportation and cost is the role of support networks.

While the decision to have the abortion is made by each protagonist alone, female friends (*Unpregnant*, *GOTV*) and family members (*Grandma*, *NRSA*) play a critical role in facilitating the abortion by participating in the abortion road trip. The narratives follow Laderman's (1996) observation that road trip narratives tend to follow two buddies on the road, one more tame and the other wild. We see this across all four narratives where the abortion-seeker is more 'straight' (Veronica, Camille, Sage, Autumn) and the 'buddy' is more wild (Bailey, Annabelle, the grandma, Skylar). Perhaps these oppositional personalities reinforce the abortion decision as a sober, sensible, and 'good' one, thereby reinforcing the political message of the narratives (Jackson 2020). Moreover, in a road narrative, the 'buddy'



is a practical storytelling device to provide dialogue, build intimacy, and further the plot (Cohan and Hark 1997) and we also contend that these relationships facilitate discussions about abortion between the characters to support the narratives' political aims. Once the girls have researched their options and organized the logistics, their abortion road trips begin.

### *On the road*

Once Veronica, Camille, Sage, and Autumn have arranged the logistics their abortion road trips begin. To center travel in the narratives we use Walters (2015) framework of viapolitics to focus in on the experience of being on the road. Here we draw on Walters' three analytical lenses—vehicles, roads, and routes—to understand the abortion journeys in the four narratives.

### *Vehicles*

As Walters (2015, 469) has argued in his case for viapolitics, 'it is important to analyze vehicles as mobile sites of power and contestation in their own right'. This is because this angle acts as a way into complex questions around 'life and death, security and insecurity, here and there, and much else' (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022, 13). In all of the novels and films, vehicles unsurprisingly play a key role in transporting the girls from their homes to the place where they have their abortion.

Cars in particular have been glorified in road trip narratives as fantasy status symbols (Archer 2017) as well as a figurative vehicle of transformation (Laderman 1996). Three of the narratives share a striking similarity in that they all include classic cars, playing into imagery

of the stereotypical American road trip. There's a Vintage burnt orange El Camino with a black stripe (*Unpregnant*), a 1955 Dodge Royal (belonging to the titular character in *Grandma* and Lily Tomlin's own car), and an unspecified older car nicknamed Buzzi (*Girls on the Verge*). These cars hold an ambivalent position in that they offer emancipatory potential, promising an independent route to an abortion while also bringing their own problems. Road trip narratives have shown cars as a symbol of independence for women (Clarke 2004), but all three cars break down or are stolen and prolong the journey, forcing the travelers to seek out garages, pay for repairs, and arrange alternative forms of transport.

When these cars go wrong the protagonists seek other vehicles to transport them—a limo rental and a taxi (*Unpregnant*) and hitchhiking (*Grandma*), while in *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, Autumn and Skylar use public transport throughout in the form of buses and the subway. Navigating public transport is stressful and complicated for the girls who have to ask for advice and directions. They struggle to work the subway card machine and to move around the city with their sizeable suitcase. This piece of baggage becomes a visual metaphor for the slog and stress of moving around a strange, inhospitable city. Public transport is a site where Autumn and Skylar meet a range of unsavory characters. On the bus to New York City they meet a young man, Jasper, who is clearly interested in Skylar and invites them to some live music. They do later call him when they require money and Skylar reluctantly lets him kiss her in an unspoken transaction. Moreover, when riding the subway at night a middle-aged man masturbates in front of them while staring at them. This exemplifies how '[a]round the world, public transit systems are hot beds of harassment and assault for women' due in part to the 'crowded and anonymous nature of shared transit' (Kern 2020, 153-4). It is the 'being with' that travelling on public transport necessitates that opens the characters up to unwanted attention and sexual harassment from men.

By focusing in on the vehicles on the abortion journey we see an upending of traditional road trip narratives. The characters are not coolly in control, they are made to feel inept with manual clutch control and forced to be at the mercy of people who can help them. The car is not always a space of freedom, for women in particular it can also be a zone of danger (Sanger 1995), and this becomes exacerbated when other forms of transport are included. The protagonists are constantly confronted with male violence and constraints to their independence, showing how mobility can be a struggle rather than simple freedom (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022).

### *Roads*

Viapolitical analyses of vehicles only make sense when infrastructures of people and things are taken into account (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022). The open road symbolizes a romantic wildness with promises of opportunity and freedom (Laderman 1996; Roberts 1997). Road narratives typically include aimless, open-ended travels (Archer 2017), of the likes of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957), Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), the 1969 film *Easy Rider* and the 2004 biopic *The Motorcycle Diaries*, but the roads in these journeys have a purpose.

At times these roads offer speed and frictionless travel as the drivers 'barrelled down the highway' in *Unpregnant* and were 'flying down the highway' in *GOTV*. This liberation is stalled by the presence of other travelers on the road who slow down journeys – 'ahead of us the freeway stretched into the distance, a seemingly unending river of traffic' (*Unpregnant*) – and get in the way, with Sage's Grandmother shouting that they 'will make it if this rat

bastard will move the hell over' (*Grandma*). The presence of others is important in a more proximate sense too. Being on the road opens up an emotional space between the characters. There are emotional geographies to automobility (Sheller 2004), and part of this is the specific set up of being in a car with another person: sitting close to one another, with few other distractions, without having to directly look them in the eye. Being out on the long stretches of road foments a situation where the characters are able to have emotional and difficult conversations, which in turn serves to drive the narrative. The road can also be a space of fun — a feeling perhaps not typically associated with abortion journeys — as the girls in the two novels sing along to girl power anthems, joke, and laugh. The road is therefore an ambivalent emotional space; it can be a space of oppression but also the forging of solidarities and bonds (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022).

In contrast to the often-busy roads, the protagonists are passing through de-peopled spaces where 'the local population was cows: 102; people: 2' and 'deserted' (*Unpregnant*) or a 'ghost town' (*GOTV*) and the locals are characterized as threats to the journey. The roads cut through rural America, places sneered at by the characters in the novels who call them 'Bumblefuck' (*Unpregnant*) and 'Podunk' (*GOTV*). In *NRSA* we don't learn about Autumn's views on the places she's traveling through but the camera lingers on her staring out of the bus window the passing landscape on the way from Pennsylvania to New York City. These rural areas become liminal spaces that need to be persevered and passed through to reach the promise of an abortion in the urban destination.

The roads are also emptied in that none of the characters ever face internal border checkpoints. The Southwest United States 'border zone' in particular is dotted with internal

checkpoints where federal immigration enforcement can ask travelers for documentation. These controls have significant impacts for undocumented pregnant people who have to travel within the border zone in order to access abortion clinics (Huddleston 2016). As more clinics are shut down in the US, the more probable this travel is. However, in *GOTV* and *Unpregnant*, which both involve traveling through the US Southwest, such checkpoints are never encountered or considered. This potential obstacle may not have been considered by the authors or, given that the adolescents in both books are white, US citizens, they may have decided that this barrier is not one that would impede the abortion road trip. Indeed, in *GOTV*, the characters cross the border into Mexico to buy the abortion pill misoprostol and do so swiftly and easily. The example of road checkpoints emphasizes that abortion mobility is experienced unevenly and the citizenship status of our protagonists gives them a privilege that not all abortion seekers have.

### *Routes*

'Routes' has been employed as a term in viapolitical analyses to highlight the turbulence and bifurcation of mobility (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022). The journeys taken in the narratives are far from smooth and all the characters face complicated diversions and obstacles. Road trip journeys can never take place completely inside a vehicle as 'car use is heavily dependent on roads, planning regulations, gas stations and traffic rules' (Boczkowska 2021, 9) and these outside elements all play a significant role in the novels and films.

The trips all require fuel, for both vehicles and people, and so stops at cafes and gas stations are common. Particularly in the novels, the two most stereotypical road trip journeys, the characters stop at diners in search of snacks and coffee. In fact, all four narratives include the

drinking of coffee, which could serve to reinforce the characters' desire to end the pregnancy with caffeinated drinks typified as a substance that must be avoided during pregnancy, often accompanied by judgmental moralizing. The stops en route also provide opportunities for the characters to engage with other people. In three of the representations (*Unpregnant*, *GOTV*, *Grandma*), one character audibly discusses abortion much to the shock of other people around them, which becomes a way to reject abortion stigma in the narratives. This role is played by the 'wilder' friend or family member accompanying the 'straighter' abortion seeker. For example, in *GOTV*, Annabelle confronts a man who hears them discuss abortion, saying 'What? Does that bother you? Abortion! Abortion! Abortion!' Annabelle says, looking pointedly at him. 'Not exactly something you would know about since you don't have a uterus.' Similarly, in *Grandma*, Elle is asked to leave the coffee shop which is on the location where the free abortion clinic used to be as retorts, 'Why? Because I'm talking about abortion?' and continues to tell the staff member about the abortions that had taken place on the premises.

While these encounters on the journey are an empowering way to visibilize abortion, the routes also come with threats or violence. In *NRSA*, Autumn and Skylar receive a constant barrage of unwanted male attention, the characters in *Unpregnant* meet a stripper who claims to want to help them but turns out to be anti-abortion while also being followed by Veronica's ex-boyfriend and in *GOTV* the girls are harassed by young men at a roadside diner who then proceed to chase them in their car and try to run them off the road. Road trip narratives have typically symbolised escape and expansion (Laderman 1996) but the routes that the characters take are constantly hampered by the patriarchal structures that they are trying to get away from. This chimes with Roberts' (1997, 66) analysis of *Thelma and Louise* where the titular characters ultimately discover they can never escape patriarchy. For women,

the road doesn't always deliver on its promise of liberation and transformation (Brigham 2015), but the protagonists here do at least escape the fatal consequences that Thelma and Louise did not.

The journeys all take place in different parts of the United States—within California (Grandma), from Pennsylvania to New York (*NRSA*), from Texas to New Mexico via Mexico (*GOTV*), and from Missouri to New Mexico (*Unpregnant*)—but all experience similar barriers to abortion access. A viapolitical analysis that centers the vehicles, roads, and routes of the narratives highlights the friction of the abortion journeys and reaffirms the injustice of abortion travel. Having to travel for an abortion is not merely an inconvenience that takes time and money, it also opens the characters up to violence. Despite this, being on the road does create a space for emotional bonding and resisting abortion stigma.

### ***Arriving: The abortion***

The arduous road trip journeys in all four narratives symbolize the undue burdens that women and pregnant people face in accessing abortions in the US. The obstacles faced, including laws, cost, and anti-abortion friends and family are all genuine obstacles, but the sheer number represented is unusual. Taken together, however, the numerous obstacles faced by each protagonist serve as a composite to tell true stories about abortion access and are necessary to drive the narratives forward. Within fictional narratives, a moment of change or drama is often used in order to propel the storyline and character arc (Kozloff 1992), and facing barriers provides plot and narrative. Despite their complex journeys, Veronica, Camille, Sage and Autumn do all arrive at their abortion destination.

All four characters end up having their abortions at clinics and in each case anti-abortion protestors loom large there. Narratively these protestors act as a useful metaphor for anti-abortion sentiment in society more broadly. Defying these protestors and pushing past them to access an abortion stands in as a marker for the audience that the protagonist is determined and sure that she wants an abortion. These are not the first anti-abortion characters that we meet in the novels and films. The characters have already confronted anti-abortion sentiments prior to their arrival and the clinic protestors provide one last chance to prove their commitment to the procedure. The protestors are diverse in their actions, including a large group singing and praying (*NRSA*) or screaming and 'hurling shame' (*Unpregnant*) to a mother and her child who tell Sage that she is a 'baby killing slut' (*Grandma*) and a quiet group who say nothing but do have anti-abortion images (*GOTV*). All the characters refuse to be intimidated and enter the abortion clinic. In *Unpregnant*, Veronica reflects on her reactions to the anti-abortion confrontation and experiences 'No guilt. No moment of awakening. No tearful repentance. My eyes slide over the signs and my heart remained unaffected. I'd made my decision long before we arrived. Those signs were just words.' Likewise, in *GOTV* for Camille, 'The sign jolts me, even though Annabelle tells me the picture is Photoshopped. But it doesn't make me change my mind.' With all the narratives, we are reassured as the audience that the characters are firm in their decision to have the abortion.

Each of the successful abortions are surgical, a term that refers to a minor physical procedure to remove the pregnancy. This is consistent with the representation of abortion on television where abortions are disproportionately surgical (Herold and Sisson 2019) even though medical abortions (the ending of a pregnancy through taking medication) make up the majority of abortions in the US (Jones et al. 2022). Interestingly, Camille (*GOTV*) first



procures misoprostol pills in Mexico to self-manage her own medical abortion, but they do not work thereby prompting Camille to seek a surgical abortion. Considering misoprostol's efficacy rate of 88-93% in clinical studies (Cohen et al. 2005) and Sisson and Kimport's (2016b) argument that nonmedical spaces on TV tend to be portrayed as unsafe for abortion, we suggest that representing medical abortions as ineffective reinforces beliefs that abortions should be practiced in medical spaces and performed by medical professionals. On a more positive note, while US television has overexaggerated the risks of abortion (which in reality are very low) (Sisson and Rowland 2017; Wayne 2016), all the abortions here are represented as safe and even mundane, perhaps as part of a movement towards portraying abortions positively (Freeman 2022).

The safety and mundanity of the procedures does not mean they are treated lightly. The abortion in *NRSA* is the most complicated of the four. When Autumn arrives at the clinic in New York City she has an ultrasound where she is told she is 18 weeks pregnant, not the 10 weeks that she was told at the crisis pregnancy center. This clinic doesn't offer abortions after 12 weeks and directs her to another clinic that can see her the next day for the two-day procedure. She speaks to a financial counselor about covering the costs as well as a counselor who goes through a questionnaire with Autumn (the possible answers being the film's title). It is during this questionnaire that we learn that Autumn has been forced into having sex. Nevertheless, her procedure is without drama, afterwards she describes it as 'just uncomfortable'. Likewise, the other characters experience some nerves and fears and are told to experience some discomfort and cramping (most notably in *Unpregnant*) but the abortions themselves are quick. The anti-climactic nature of this is noted by Camille in *GOTV*:

Five minutes. That's all it took. Annabelle, Bea, and I have been gone for days. We've spent all our money. We've been to Alamo, Progreso, Nuevo Progreso, the Texas Panhandle ... all this way, all this money, for a five-minute procedure.

In *Grandma*, Sage's quick, legal, vacuum aspiration abortion is contrasted with her grandmother's abortion which was clandestine and painful, 'in someone's basement [...] He said he went to medical school but I doubt it.' The speed and simplicity of these abortions juxtapose the contracted, stressful, and difficult journeys that all the characters were forced to undertake.

Representations of abortion are increasingly showing it as a positive decision for people and that they can even flourish after an abortion (Latimer 2009; Freeman 2022). This is especially clear in the two novels as Veronica becomes her school valedictorian in *Unpregnant* and Camille in *GOTV* experiences emotional growth; 'This road trip, the abortion, there are bigger things in the world now, and I think I might be able to handle them.' The promise of mobility and its dual ability to take you anywhere but also to change who you are (Brigham 2015), appears to have been realized with these characters. Moreover, despite their fears that anyone would find out that they were seeking an abortion, three of the characters do end up deciding to be open about it. Veronica in *Unpregnant* decides to talk openly about her abortion at school and that she was forced to travel 'because that's the closest place to get that done around here'. In *GOTV* Camille decides to tell her mother because 'I'm not embarrassed anymore. I'm not ashamed.' In *Grandma*, Sage tells her mother she needs money for an abortion after failing to raise the funds any other way and it is her mother who drives her home from the clinic. In these three narratives the abortion provides some kind of growth. In *NRSA*, however, Autumn does not appear to experience a positive resolution: we do not see

her contacting a social worker for support and the film ends with her returning to Pennsylvania to an abusive workplace and potentially abusive family situation. Autumn does appear to feel relieved once the abortion is complete and that is the only time in the film we see her able to laugh with Skylar. Indeed, relief is the most prominent emotion felt in each narrative, which is consistent with studies of women who have had abortions (Rocca et al. 2020).

The bulk of the narratives are taken up with the complex road trips from their homes to a different location where they can procure a straightforward abortion and return home. What is interesting about these return journeys is that in contrast to the obstacles, challenges, and length, the return journeys are barely covered. The abortion is the culmination of the narrative and the return journey is a simple matter of covering miles. From a viapolitical perspective, it is the *lack* of struggle and turbulence that signals the de-politicized nature of the return travel in contrast to the outbound journeys.

## **Conclusions**

The abortion stories studied here all follow a remarkably similar narrative structure. We meet Veronica, Camille, Sage and Autumn who are all experiencing an unwanted pregnancy and have made the decision to have an abortion. They all experience barriers to access where they live and so they begin a journey with a friend or relative and experience more obstacles in their search for an abortion. Nevertheless, they all manage to procure an abortion and the stories end with a far simpler journey home and the knowledge that they have made the right decision for themselves. In contrast to earlier representations of abortion which focus on the

decision to have the abortion as the narrative arc, this new wave of abortion narratives use the abortion road trip to focus on the barriers and politics of abortion access in the contemporary United States. This does not mean that all potential barriers are included in these representations, as they all tell the stories of young, childless, white US citizens (Sisson and Kimport 2016a), but they are an important ‘counter-narrative (Millar 2017) for highlighting socio-politico-legal issues such as the lack of abortion clinics, the distance required to travel, legal rights for adolescents, the cost of the procedure, and the opinions of family and friends.

The abortion road trip being the center of the narrative has important political goals. By accepting it as a given abortion is normal, the authors and directors bypass discussions of individual-level abortion stigma to instead highlight the structural barriers that make accessing abortions difficult, especially for adolescents. Although *Grandma*’s director explains that he did not intend to make an issue film (Keegan 2015), the three other narratives have been more explicitly political. Pointedly, the director of *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* observes that previous abortion films have been ‘overly-explored by men’ and argues that “women and people with uteruses need access and care and that care needs to be affordable and in their town... nobody should have to take a bus 200 miles to get to an abortion clinic” (Ramos 2021). *Unpregnant* was written in direct response to a 72-hour waiting period law in South Dakota which made one of the authors “super pissed off” (Roshell 2019). Likewise, *Girls on the Verge* was written in the aftermath of H.B. 2 in Texas and in her ‘author’s note’ Biggs Waller details her experiences working as a volunteer escort at Planned Parenthood and directly writes, ‘If you need help or advice on pregnancy, there are resources available to you’, followed by details for organizations such as Planned Parenthood, Jane’s Due Process, and the National Network of Abortion Funds. The focus on the structural context also reinforces the message that the girls are not at ‘fault’ and instead they are being oppressed by

the wider patriarchal system that seeks to govern women's bodies and reproductive lives as seen through laws, anti-abortion individuals and groups, and the constant threat of male violence.

The quintessential, all-American road trip is challenged and reworked in abortion road trip narratives. While some tropes remain with the vintage cars, diners, wild/tame buddy relationship, the whiteness of the characters, and the promise of the open road, the narratives reject gendered and apolitical norms. Gone are the hyper-masculine road heroes who need to ignore the distractions of women in order to focus on their journey but also gone are the female protagonists who suffer the often-violent consequences of transgressing the norms of femininity and domesticity. Veronica, Camille, Sage and Autumn are all affected by patriarchal control but in the end they are able to achieve bodily autonomy and are happy with their decision to have an abortion. Moreover, Laderman (1996) argues that there has been a drift from road films as progressive and political in the 1960s to being depoliticized and socially indifferent by the 1990s. The overt political angle of the road trip narratives analyzed here not only demonstrate that the stories of adolescent girls are worthy of consideration, but also that these stories can offer accurate accounts of abortion access in the ongoing political struggle to reduce barriers to care.

In addition to challenging traditional road trip scholarship, our analysis also contributes to mobilities scholarship through our use of viapolitics and our focus on abortion mobilities. First, our viapolitical analysis centers the struggle and politics of the abortion travel these fictional characters undergo, thereby rejecting the notion of mobility as a frictionless and positive experience (Walters, Heller and Pezzani 2022). We believe this reinforces how

useful viapolitics can be as a framework for examining mobilities generally, and abortion mobilities specifically. While it has rarely been used outside of migration research, a focus on vehicles, roads and routes, as well as the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the journey allowed us to focus on the burden of abortion travel. Second, abortion mobilities, as located under the umbrella of reproductive mobilities, is a growing and vital area of research and we have shown how a focus on representation acts as a window into the politics and discourse of abortion travel. As abortion travel in the US looks likely to increase in distance and burden, understanding experiences of journeys, fictional or real, has never been more important.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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