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# Unbound: Dismantling the Genre of Female Coming-of-Age Films

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Unbound:  
Dismantling the Genre of Female Coming-of-Age Films

*Theoretical Framework and Initial Organization*

The genre of coming-of-age films relies on sexist clichés that perpetuate simplistic representations of young women and saturate the mainstream public consciousness with dangerously patronizing depictions of what it means for a girl to enter into adulthood. My senior project will combine my two primary areas of study, media and feminism, in order to engage with the normative depictions of female coming-of-age stories that are present within the current media landscape. Through creating a short documentary that is viewed within a gallery installation, I intend to dismantle the patriarchal gendering of traditional female coming-of-age stories and present alternative feminist narratives to these stories through the voices of the women in my own life.

While many feminist media scholars before me have pointed to the extreme gendering of commercial films, my own field research on coming-of-age stories has revealed it to be one of the most stereotypically gendered arenas within modern media. Traditional notions of gender identity, almost to the point of caricature, are so obviously present within this genre that I immediately flagged it as an area in need of critical intervention and of a reconfiguration of the basic tenets of the genre. Simply explained, coming-of-age stories privilege the narratives of boys and present male lives as more complex, and thus more important, than female lives. Films in this genre that are centered around a male protagonist typically employ a plot where a young boy embarks on an adventure, often into some sort of wilderness, where he learns to build strong friendships with his peers through their shared experiences. Conversely, when these films are focused on a female protagonist, they often revolve around a girl relentlessly pursuing her male crush, trying to achieve

popularity amongst her peers, and engaging in petty drama that exaggerates the fragility and unpredictability of women. While I have compiled lists of movies that exemplify these gendered clichés, there are a few films in particular that stand out because of their nearly identical portrayals of gender across multiple generations and national contexts.

The 1986 film *Stand By Me*, directed by Rob Reiner, details the adventures that the young protagonist, Gordie, embarks upon with his three best friends as they venture into the wilderness to find the body of a local missing child. By the end of their macabre quest the four boys have exposed their most private hopes and fears to one another, entering into a new level of friendship that heralds them into the morally ambiguous realm of adulthood. With eerily similar themes, *The Kings of Summer* (Vogt-Roberts 2013) follows the adventures of two teenage boys who are fed up with their families and decide to build a house in the woods where they can live “as men.” As reality begins to diverge from their expectations, both boys are faced with complex questions about what it means to be an adult and they learn to rely on their friendship with one another in order to define themselves as young men. While these films are separated by almost three decades, the themes present within them are shockingly similar. Both movies revolve around the intricate relationships that boys foster with one another and emphasize traveling outside of the home in order to gain knowledge about adulthood and masculinity. The fact that these two films are separated by 27 years yet have nearly identical themes indicates that male coming-of-age stories resonate with audiences across multiple generations because of the narrative structure that treats young boys as complex and engaging subjects.

While dangerously one-dimensional depictions of young women appear to be present across the decades as well, it is also crucial to notice that simplistic stories of female maturation span across different continents. *Mean Girls* (2004 Waters) has become one of the most iconic female coming-of-age stories in the United States and persists as a cult favorite over a decade after its release. The plot revolves around Cady, a teenager from South Africa, transferring to a high school in an American suburban town where she becomes assimilated, mostly by accident, into the most

popular clique on campus. While the film does delve into critical satire at certain points, it nonetheless perpetuates the trope of female maturity as laden with drama that reifies patriarchal notions of women as desperate, shallow, and hormonal. The 2008 film *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*, directed by Gurinder Chadha, follows a similar plotline where a young English schoolgirl attempts to win the affection of the new boy in town while simultaneously competing to throw a more extravagant birthday party than the most popular girl in school. Both of these films exemplify how female narratives are drastically more simplistic than stories that revolve around males. Gendered stereotypes within the genre serve to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies that situate men as more intellectually and emotionally complex than women and continue to contribute to the internalized sexism of modern media. The transnational nature of these films also indicates that these damaging representations exist within multiple cultural contexts and permeate the global imagination of what it means for a young woman to enter into adulthood.

In order to combat these toxic stereotypes I will be gathering eight women between the ages of 45-60 that have been influential in my life to discuss their thoughts on their own coming-of-age. I have selected these eight women because of the courage, kindness, intelligence and patience I have witnessed them exhibit in their everyday lives as I have grown up around them. These women have been my mentors, my confidants, and my support network as I have discovered my own voice as a young feminist academic, and I intend for my close personal relationship with them to inform the final configuration of the project. Apart from my personal admiration for each of these women, I have also selected them with the intent of documenting the stories of women from a wide spectrum of ethnicities, nationalities, class backgrounds and cultures. It is critical for my documentary to incorporate principles of intersectional feminism through the representation of a diverse group of women in order to challenge the normative assumptions of female identity that revolve around whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality and a cisgendered body.

My commitment to intersectionality stems from the work of women of color feminists who made critical interventions into oppressive white feminist ideologies

such as Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty and Audre Lorde. In particular, Crenshaw has informed my academic pursuits over the years because of her seminal work on the necessity for intersectionality to inform feminist activism. She argues that “the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women” (Crenshaw 1252). My project aims to reject the privileging of white women’s stories and seeks to present an intersectional approach to the reconfiguration of female coming-of-age stories through the ability of each woman I interview to define her own specific identitarian politics. Apart from Crenshaw, Audre Lorde’s formulation that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” has greatly influenced my desire to intervene into this specific film genre (112). While the speech in which this quote is located addressed the inability of white feminism to work across barriers of racial difference, I’m curious as to how this concept can be applied to gendered media. If film can reinforce sexist representations of women, why can’t it subvert those clichés and provide complex depictions instead? I want my project to explore this notion of dismantling oppressive systems and examine whether my work reiterates or challenges Lorde’s idea that techniques of domination cannot be reclaimed to benefit the marginalized.

In order to do so, the documentary will juxtapose traditional talking head interviews with experimental B-roll footage that I create collaboratively with each woman I interview. A collaborative process is incredibly important to my project because I want the women to retain agency over their own stories and to feel that my editing process will not eclipse their ability for self-definition. I am asking each woman to gather photos, home videos, documents and miscellaneous objects that they feel represent their coming-of-age and to allow me to digitize these items so I can create an archive of their experiences. I will then use a digital projector to project these images onto their bodies, focusing primarily on their torso, arms and head as an embodied “screen.” The use of the projected images illustrates how these significant life experiences are inscribed within their skin and are constantly

working to make them the people they are today. Internal histories will be transformed into external histories so the documentary viewer can grasp a visual articulation of the life changing events that these women have experienced.

This concept of collaboration is historically intertwined with feminism because of its ability to produce work that is far richer and more theoretically complex than solo endeavors are able to generate. Geraldine Pratt concludes that collaboration can be “one means of achieving the kind of reflexivity necessary to recognize the limits of the knowledge that we produce,” indicating that when feminists work amongst each other it helps the individual understand their own intellectual positionality through the collaboration with their peers (46). Similarly, Antoinette Burton and Jean Allman discuss how their work together “encouraged us to contemplate in new ways the challenges of speaking across areas and boundaries without fetishizing the specificities of the local” (201). It is my intention to utilize the productive aspects of feminist collaboration in order to generate a project that expresses a narrative that would otherwise be impossible to create without the contribution of these eight women.

The spirit of collaboration also carries over into my exploration of what “coming-of-age” truly means. Due to the fact that my interviewees are speaking about both positive and negative experiences, I intend for my documentary to not only reject traditional gendered narratives, but also to question the normative idea of *when* a girl transitions into adulthood. It is necessary to explore the temporal significance of coming-of-age moments because the filmic representations depict the early teenage years as the only period of possible transition. I want the women that I interview to define their own coming-of-age exactly as they want to, unhindered by typical notions of age. Pivotal experiences can occur at any point in life, and I want my interviewees to have the ability to challenge the idea that youth is the only time that key transformative moments can occur.

The documentary portion of my project is focused on gathering and arranging the memories of the women I interview, so the purpose of creating a physical installation is to illustrate exactly how I’m using their stories to critique the gendered genre of coming-of-age films. Fashioned out of white PVC pipe, I will

construct a zig-zagging hallway that is bound together to mimic the image of a tall fence. I will attach text and photos on the inside of this hallway that exemplify the gendered coming-of-age tropes I am pushing against, effectively enclosing the viewer in a claustrophobic hallway of clichés. The viewer will then walk through this disorienting hallway at their leisure, which eventually opens up into a wider alcove where a screen will be playing the documentary. Along the inside of this alcove will be quotes and photos taken from the interviews I have conducted with the women in order to contrast with the documents crowding the hallway. The viewer should take a breath of relief when they reach the end and enter into the wider space of the interviewee's stories. My intent with the installation is to illustrate the confining nature of coming-of-age representations in pop culture and to demonstrate that real women's narratives are far more complex, and offer much more critical examinations of gender, than their filmic counterparts.

Overall, this project will provide an outlet for the voices of women who are not usually heard within mainstream media and challenge assumptions of female adulthood within various cultural contexts. I hope that the combination of the documentary and gallery installation will generate self-reflection within the viewer so that they begin to question their own coming-of-age story while simultaneously forming new opinions about the normative representations of women in the genre as a whole.

### *Production Challenges and Insights*

In order to accomplish my capstone project I have developed a strict production schedule that I have adhered to so far throughout the process, despite many significant changes to the format of my project. Filming was completed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October where I interviewed the eight women who I am including in my documentary. Over the course of two weekends I was able to film my discussions with them, and the wide range of stories I gathered were even richer than I had hoped for. Each woman talked with me for 20 to 40 minutes and was extremely enthusiastic about my project, particularly about collaborating with me to create the

projected B-roll images. The spirit of feminist collaboration that I feel is intrinsic to my project materialized in extremely beneficial ways throughout filming. I found that the process was very similar to Burton and Allman's conclusion that their collaboration forced each other to "reflect very carefully on the politics of location, our different training and academic experiences, and the distinct audiences we hoped to engage with our work" (201). While each woman I interviewed had a topic in mind before delivering her interview, we fed off of each other's insights and worked together to figure out the main themes of their narrative which then transferred over into the projected images. The spirit of collaboration manifested the most through the production of this B-roll because my footage relied on the ability of each woman to guide me through a visual representation of her own coming-of-age.

My use of projection was greatly inspired by Julie Taymor's application of this technique in her 2007 film *Across the Universe*. In a psychedelic, drug-induced musical sequence, Taymor employs the technique of projection to illustrate the pain, chaos, and confusion the characters were experiencing in connection to the Vietnam War. One character is an undocumented British citizen living in New York as a struggling artist while his best friend is drafted into the military after a failed college career, and both have very polarizing relationships to the war. Video taken from the battlefield is projected onto the characters' faces and allows the viewer a window into their inner turmoil through both men's unique positionality. Although Taymor uses this technique to portray hopelessness and despair, I am utilizing it in a way that encompasses a broad spectrum of sentiments. During filming I found that the projection process elicited a wide range of emotions that the interviews were not able to provoke, probably because of the deep-rooted and often conflicting attachments the women associated with each of the images they shared with me. Although each woman was very open with her oral testimony, the projection of photographs helped me depict their abstracted experiences in a visual manner that added an even richer layer to their individual narratives.

I am currently working on editing the documentary and have achieved a final cut for all of the eight interviews, minus details such as color correction and audio



manipulations. My technique for approaching the editing of this project is to cut each interview separately and then combine them once all eight have a structure of their own. Instead of pulling the best sound bites from each interview to create a rough cut that mixes the narratives together, I think it is necessary to understand these women's stories in a linear fashion and arrange them separately to secure the integrity of each individual story. While the end product will be much more experimental than a straightforward talking head documentary, I do plan on assembling a longer version of the film where each woman can tell her coming-of-age story at length that includes details not encompassed by my version for thesis. Having these two different versions is necessary because if I only did the short experimental cut, the women's rich stories would be erased and would replicate the simplistic, silencing techniques of the genre that I'm trying to critique. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks writes that "I will not have my life narrowed down," effectively encapsulating why it is necessary that I create a long version of the documentary (23). While it will not be shown for my thesis, it is essential to create the extended cut so the stories of the eight fantastic women I have interviewed can be told in their entirety and with the nuance they deserve without being hindered by project-mandated guidelines.

In addition to working on the final cut for the documentary, I have reformulated the design of the installation portion of the project and am currently planning the logistics of building it. Instead of constructing a zig-zagging fence like I had originally planned, I am condensing my installation so that it fits on one wall of the gallery space and takes a less literal approach to the themes of my project. I am planning on mounting a flat screen TV to the wall that will play my documentary on loop, which will be approximately 15 minutes in length. Mounted on the wall around the flat screen will be a large collection of images that exemplify the patriarchally constructed coming-of-age stories I am attempting to dismantle. This cluster of images will be connected to each other by black yarn, creating a web-like effect around the centerpiece of the flat screen TV. The complex, inter-connected appearance of the web is intended to provoke the viewer to formulate ideas about the contrasting positions created by the juxtaposition of the footage on screen and

the surrounding images. While there are many elements from my original installation plan present within this updated version, I believe that it will be more feasible to construct, represent my ideas in a more thought-provoking manner, and allow the women I have interviewed to be the focal point of the project.

An additional facet of the installation that is new to my thesis is the inclusion of a photograph and a short biography of each woman mounted on the wall across from the larger installation. These individual portraits will serve as a supplement to the main art piece and introduce an interactive element where the viewer can choose to obtain more information about a specific woman after watching the documentary. The purpose of including these photos and placards is to highlight how coming-of-age stories are highly personal, individual experiences, unlike the mass-produced stories manufactured for the movie theaters. When examining the films that center around female characters, it becomes quite clear that the individual identity of the protagonist does not matter and that she could be arbitrarily transplanted into any of these films since the basic structure and plotlines are the same. By highlighting the individuality of my eight interviewees through the portraits on the opposite wall, my installation will actively reject the homogenization that occurs in current coming-of-age films and illustrate how women's stories are far more complexly personal than is represented in current cinematic depictions.

The most intriguing part of my production process was the way that I unexpectedly found my own personal feminism being called into question by the women I was interviewing. As an FGSS minor, I have taken a great number of classes that have informed my own ideas on intersectional feminism and I have learned to apply my own inclusive pedagogy to my work within media studies. While my background in feminist and queer theory is quite solid, particularly with the more theoretically dense authors, it is often the simple concepts that I take for granted that challenge my application of feminism in everyday life. As I chatted with my interviewees, I was startled by a few of their statements because they pushed against my own personal notions of what it means to be a "liberated" woman. I put the word liberated in quotes because it sounds trite, but there is no other way to

describe the gut reaction I felt when faced with a lived experience that contradicted my own ideas of how one leads a fulfilling, feminist life.

For example, one woman explained to me how becoming a Christian was pivotal in keeping her marriage alive and acted as a coming-of-age experience. She said she realized that she needed to be a better wife by not changing her husband, but by changing herself and her actions in order for their relationship to continue working. At first taken aback, I realized that her traditional conception of gender dynamics in a marriage clashed with my own ideas of what it means to be a strong woman. As we talked more I realized how religion, and her differing notions of gender roles, was integral to her coming-of-age story and I was forced to confront the possibility that my conception of a strong, intelligent, feminist woman was not actually as inclusive as I had thought. My respect for her should not have wavered simply because she had expressed ideas that ran contrary to my rather militant feminist beliefs, especially because feminism can manifest in highly different ways for different people. After my time with her I reflected upon how the other interviews I had conducted either reiterated or challenged my own feminism, and throughout the production process I've realized that this project has taught me more about positionality and the differential uptake of feminist ideologies than all of my time in academia.

Overall, the production process for my thesis went smoothly and post-production is going in the same direction. The theoretical framework for my project manifested through the collaborative nature of the interviews and my eventual realization that I needed to create two different versions of the documentary to support my understanding of the coming-of-age genre as toxically simplistic. Reformulating my ideas for the installation portion of the project was also critical, because after I had completed filming I realized I needed to construct a space that placed the women at the forefront of the project instead of as an auxiliary part to an overly-complicated art piece. During production and even now as I work on the final cut, my conceptions of a "feminist identity" are called into question, which forces me to critically reflect on how I can incorporate a truly inclusive, non-judgmental form

of feminist activism into my media work for thesis and also in the future as I enter the professional sphere.

### *Final Reflections*

Looking back at my project after the final iteration of my thesis has been installed in the gallery, I can confidently say that I'm proud of my final work. The gradual evolution of this project from the beginning of the semester to the end has developed my original idea into a more polished, theoretical, and complex project than I had ever imagined it would be. Producing a mixed-media installation was something I had never done before, but as I critically thought about the intentions of my project I realized that an installation was necessary to communicate the theory that my project engages with. In addition to realizing that a single-track video was not the best format for my project, the development of feminist collaboration, as I have mentioned before, was an unexpected addition to the process and greatly informed my praxis as an artist. Even in the post-production process, I relied on the women who I interviewed to inform the structure of my documentary and I drew on their thoughts about coming-of-age experiences to inform the final design of my installation to best represent their narratives. I thoroughly enjoyed the process of developing my thesis over the course of a semester because I'm not often given such a large amount of time to develop my ideas for other academic projects. Much like writing a paper, I went through multiple drafts of my installation before settling on the final iteration of my thesis and I now better understand how to allow for change and adjustment throughout the creative process.

While I ultimately had a good experience with the production of my thesis, there were a few elements of my project that I feel I could have better managed. In particular, I realized in retrospect that I should have shot the projected B-roll images in 48fps instead of 24fps because the smaller frame rate does not allow me to easily manipulate the speed of the footage. I received many comments from viewers throughout the process that they would have liked to see the B-roll in slow motion, but the footage that I had shot in 24fps would not have appeared smooth if I had attempted to manipulate the speed. This mistake has bothered me throughout

the entire process because I agreed with my peers' critique, and my failure to think about the limitation of a certain frame rate taught me to think more critically about the structure of my projects in the future so that I have flexibility with the footage during the post-production process. Another area in which I encountered a similar learning experience was my decision to place behind-the-scenes audio in the transitions between each interview. This concept of using "unofficial" audio emerged quite late into the post-production process but I'm extremely pleased with the end result because it adds a reflexive element to my documentary that I had not previously conceptualized. Inserting this audio illustrated the importance of capturing footage before and after the "official" shoot because it adds a candid element to the film that acknowledged my relationship with the interviewees. I enjoyed seeing how this material, which was previously deemed as unusable and extraneous, actually became a major source of inspiration for me and how it was able to communicate a more holistic version of each of the women's experiences.

In addition to learning from the technical aspects of my project, I now understand how to ethically represent another person's story in a way that does not manipulate their original narrative. Having never made a documentary that focused on such a sensitive subject, I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to faithfully represent each of the women's stories because their interviews were so complex and time consuming. Condensing each of their stories into an interesting, two-minute segment that kept the integrity of their experiences was difficult because I had to judge what was "important" to their overall narrative. While I did solve that problem partly by creating the two separate versions of the film, I also figured out how to arrange the most exciting bits of their stories in way that still emphasized the whole picture without turning it into a spectacle. Particular moments in the documentary, such as the women who talk about their experiences with abortion and domestic abuse, made me question whether or not I was staying true to their stories throughout the editing process. It's easy to edit interviews in a way that increases the shock value of the story, so every time I cut footage out of a particular woman's segment I was careful to question the reason for doing so and what effect it had on that woman's overall story. Apart from learning new technical skills by

producing this film entirely on my own, I also gained valuable insight on how to ethically manage a project that could easily devolve into spectacle.

Delving into the ethics of documentary filmmaking helped me answer a question that I had posed in the initial stages of my project regarding Audre Lorde's famous statement that "the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house." I challenged myself to analyze how the statement was applicable to filmmaking, and in the case of my thesis, I found it to be more complicated than I had originally thought. Defining what the "master's tools" are in the realm of film requires an understanding of the normative modes of filmmaking, and I realized that the technique of feminist collaboration I used throughout the process is not a traditional tool. While feminist filmmakers have certainly used this technique before me, I believe it does not count as one of the "master's tools" because of its radical foreclosure of hierarchy, and therefore proves Lorde's point that new tools must be created to enact change. However, traditional filmmaking mechanisms helped me achieve my overall end product and I do believe that traditional filmmaking methods can subvert oppressive norms. In order for real change to occur, whether it is in cinema or in a social justice movement, I think that a combination of utilizing old tools and of inventing new techniques is necessary path to tread. Lorde's sentiment is also reflected in the specific women I chose for my film because I attempted to provide a group of women who have diverse backgrounds in order to subvert the normative subject of coming-of-age films (i.e. white, cisgender, straight). So in this respect, Lorde is correct that the master's tools cannot be used for effective change because in the case of film, the master's tools do not include an incorporation of diverse voices and experiences. Ultimately, my employment of traditional film techniques and uptake of new ones, such as feminist collaboration and intersectionality, worked to produce a subversive film that is also accessible to the average viewer and pulls from the theorizing of women of color feminists.

While the primary purpose of my project was to create alternative narratives to harmful representations of female coming-of-age experiences, I think the most important intervention my film made was its acknowledgment of the temporal disparities between current depictions of transition and the ones presented by my

interviewees. During the planning stages of my project I talked briefly about the temporal aspects of coming-of-age films, discussing how most narratives are bound to the teenage years and do not allow for personal growth outside of this brief time period. Looking back on my complete installation, I feel that allowing the women I interviewed the agency to define a significant transformational experience at any age was critical to the final iteration of my thesis. While the diverse narratives and complex interviews I received worked to critique the traditional filmic representations, it was really the shift in the temporal aspect of a coming-of-age experience that is unique to my project and has the potential to challenge the genre. My thesis confronts the simplistic and homogenized nature of coming-of-age stories and utilizes subversive notions of time to illustrate that real accounts of coming-of-age experiences are far more complex and nonlinear than film leads us to believe.

Overall, the process of creating *Unbound* went more smoothly than I had anticipated and I learned far more about my own artistic and academic interests than I could have expected. I feel that my installation has accomplished my primary objectives, and that while it does have the potential to evolve into a longer project, I think that my interviewees have already dedicated enough emotional labor to the process as it currently stands. Combining my two areas of study, media and feminism, my project effectively represents my own interests and illustrates how interdisciplinary work can be successful at challenging the toxic, normative narratives that cinema currently presents to young women. While I did experience some challenges during the production process and was forced to reformulate my ideas for the physical installation many times, the final iteration turned out to represent my ideas and the supporting theories far better than my original plan. I am proud to call *Unbound* the culminating work of my time as an undergraduate student.

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## *Installation Photos*



