

An Examination of the Parking Goddess and Gendered Vulnerability on the US West

Coast

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To Sarah Clark,

Thanks, mom, for all the love.

Abstract

This thesis explores the role of the parking goddess and related vernacular religious parking practices in mitigating gendered vulnerability when parking. The use of rhymes and rituals calling on Asphalta (or similar figures) by Neo-Pagan or new age practitioners were explored for their connection to women's gendered experiences of parking. Seven women residing on the West Coast of the US participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place both in person and over the phone due to Covid-19 restrictions. The results indicated that participants use their vernacular religious parking practices as a means of mitigating the fear they experience due to the vulnerability of parking as women. Vernacular religious parking practices helped relieve stress in liminal situation, protect against violence, manifest prosperity, and connect to a feminine spiritual lineage. Additionally, this research shows that the study of small-scale daily spiritual and religious folklore can illuminate larger social and political issues.

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Introduction

Most teenagers are embarrassed by their parents for one reason or another. Maybe they pick you up from school in a pink fluffy bathrobe. Maybe they cheer too loudly for you during the play or game. Maybe they show your prom date your naked baby photos. What got me was when my mother would shout, “THANK YOU, PARKING GODDESS!!!” whenever she nabbed the perfect parking place.

My mother passed away just after I graduated college, yet the memory of those moments, of her glee, and of her exalting a deity in exchange for something as pedestrian as an available parking space stuck with me; and it left me with questions. Did other people do this? Was this just a quirk of hers or of her friend group? Did it. . . *work*? I went online to search for references to “the parking goddess” and “Asphaltia,” and after some time came upon a humorous, popular book titled *Found Goddesses: From Asphalta to Viscera* (Grey and Penelope 1988). Mom wasn’t the only believer.

“She’s real,” I thought excitedly. “Asphalta is real!”

Of course, along with this discovery came more questions. Real for whom? In what way? And why? What else would I learn from others who, like my mother, invoked this deity when parking their cars?

This thesis examines the vernacular religious parking practices of a group of women and gender nonconforming folk in the West Coast of the United States. It explores the role gender plays in the construction of these practices, examining how feminist spirituality

and gendered vulnerabilities shape women's experiences of parking. By examining the context within which the vernacular religious parking practices arise, it becomes clear these practices serve four key roles for the participants: relieving stress, protecting against violence, manifesting prosperity, and connecting to feminine spiritual lineage.

The practices discussed in this thesis generally sit at the intersection of new age spirituality, Neo-Paganism, goddess spirituality, Catholicism, manifestation, the West Coast, and women's gendered experiences. I have grouped the practices together for the sake of analysis as they have many similarities, but they are by no means one and the same. Due to the personal and organic development and oral transmission of the practices, no two practices are identical. Each is tailored to the individual.

For example, one of the women I interviewed tosses coins or other offerings out of her car window when she wants help from Asphalta to locate a parking space. One encourages her kids to cross their fingers and toes to the parking gods. One learned from her mother how to hex for parking. One asks Our Lady of Asphalta for help, viewing her as a sort of patron saint of parking. One calls on St. Gladys and uses the power of manifestation to find parking. One shouts "Doris Day" three times, invoking the name of the famous actress and symbol of wholesomeness to help manifest parking. And one, despite herself never turning to the parking goddess, shared several stories of friends and colleagues referencing the figure.

Community Context

For this research, I chose to interview women and nonbinary femme folk from my general community in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. Most I met through either my late mother or my nonbinary aunt. Three of the women (Ticia, Anne, and Maud) I've known since before I was ten years old, having met with my family through extracurricular classes for homeschooled kids. Ticia and my mother were very close, but she lived in Washington, a few hours' drive from our home in Portland, Oregon, so we saw her and her three kids less frequently than we would have liked. Today, Ticia's eldest is living in California pursuing a graduate degree in art, while the other two are older teenagers soon to be striking out on their own.

Anne lives in Portland having moved from Detroit, Michigan. Her daughter is a few years older than me but attended homeschool classes at the same learning center I did. They would often babysit me (though I have little recollection of this), and as a result Anne knows more about my childhood than I do in some respects. She works at a public library (although she was careful to point out that she is not a librarian) and is an excellent writer.

Both Ticia and Anne remained close friends of my mother until she died, but my independent relationships with them started as they helped me cope with my mother's passing. This is how I began to connect with Katherine and Marny as well, both of whom were part of a larger group of friends my mother had that formed out of neighborhood political activism fighting illegal heavy metal pollution coming from a nearby manufacturing plant. I'd met members of this group of women at the Portland Women's

March in 2016, and my mom would occasionally share stories about them. After my mom passed away, Katherine and I developed a routine of meeting for tea and pie while I was in Portland. Originally from the East Coast, she now lives in Portland where she raised her (now adult) daughter. While she has worked for the last twenty-five years as a licensed massage therapist, she is contemplating retirement, although she was quick to say she has mixed feelings about it.

Marny is the only self-identified witch of the group (she practices homeopathy as well). She has a teenage daughter and makes a peach pie that is to die for. She used to bring my mom food when it became too difficult for her to cook, and I had the pleasure of eating it whenever I was home from college. Marny also works at a nonprofit in Portland aimed at providing radical hospitality, community, food, supplies, and relationships for women and gender-nonconforming people who experience gender-based marginalization.

Then there's Maud, another library worker living in Portland. She is a mother of two young adults, both of whom were homeschooled in the same community as me. I remember seeing them quite frequently, but always through shared playdates or birthday parties with my cousins or overlapping homeschool activities, as she is primarily a friend of my aunt's.

While the women above all knew my mother in some way, I also interviewed two women who were not as connected to her: Jill and Sarah. I met Jill over the phone when a longtime friend of my mother put us in touch. Jill introduced herself as a shamanic

practitioner of Reiki whose passion in life is the beach. Lucky for her, she lives on the Oregon Coast with the love of her life, three cats, and a dog. She is also a mom and has adult children.

Finally, I interviewed my friend Sarah whom I met at college. We connected over a love of dancing, our shared pagan-leaning upbringing, and the fact that our mothers both had – and would eventually pass away from – cancer. Originally hailing from Coos Bay, Oregon, Sarah now lives in California where she is working towards her master’s degree in psychology. She was the youngest interviewee by far and also the only one not to have children.

All of the women are predominantly white-passing, middle-class, well-educated urbanites as is often characteristic of Neo-Pagans (Magliocco 2004, 7) and new age practitioners, and five of the seven identify either as bisexual, not straight, or gender nonconforming. It seems fitting that this culture of new age, Neo-Pagan vernacular religion, coupled with a dominant North American car culture (Jakle and Sculle 2005), sees a prevalence of car-related magical practices and the existence of a new age and Neo-Pagan feminine parking deity.

Methodology

I spent the summer of 2022 conducting audio-only, semi-structured interviews with women I know from Oregon. I was able to interview Marny, Maud, and Katherine face to face, either at a coffee shop or at a local park. Ticia lives in Washington and Sarah now

lives in California, so I recorded their interviews remotely. Despite living in Portland, Anne opted to have her interview recorded remotely due to concerns about COVID-19. Jill also opted to conduct our interview over the phone as she lives a few hours outside of Portland.

While I primarily looked at the content of the narratives, I also kept an eye out for times when obvious poetic markers, other utterances (pauses, laughter, hesitation, volume shifts, etc.), and noticeable shifts in language (such as might indicate code-switching) were present to ascertain what topics people are more or less comfortable sharing about.

By and large, I found that the women viewed their parking practices as “not important,” “not interesting,” “small,” or otherwise insignificant. They mirrored this perception in their narrative structure by offering short responses or “micro-narratives” rather than longer stories. I base my definition of “micro-narratives” on Jan Blommaert’s work in applied ethnopoetics (Blommaert 2006), but I have chosen to alter the concept to better fit my research. Blommaert defined micro-narratives as “short bursts of narrative interactionally embedded in question-answer sequences” where you can have several stories that are produced containing intricate relations to one another (Blommaert 2006, 184). He uses the definition in relation to applied ethnopoetic analysis of transcripts from police interviews, courtroom hearings, and so on, where one might have a stricter question-answer sequence with very high stakes, but one can apply the general concept to the interviews I conducted as well. Because the women found their beliefs and practices to be

unimportant or trivial, they would offer shorter answers that downplayed the belief or practice, thus eliciting more of a question-answer flow to our conversations.

For the sake of my work, micro-narratives are short bursts of narrative. They are often embedded within a larger communicative structure, such as a questions-answer sequence, a conversation, or a longer narrative, and they are often produced containing intricate relations to one another (although this is not required). Additionally, the practices mentioned in this work can be construed as “micro-rituals” on a similar basis. They are short bursts of ritual embedded within a larger process, such as the act of tossing a coin as an offering out of the window while pulling into a parking spot. When looking at the micro-narratives and micro-rituals focused on vernacular parking practices, it becomes clear that women experience a fear of gender-based violence when parking that is so pervasive it has become seen as ordinary or unimportant to talk about.

Ethnography

This research is informed by Elaine Lawless’ interpretation of ethnography in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* in her book *Holy Women, Wholly Women*. In doing ethnography, culture can be seen as composed of contested codes and representations and science as within historical and linguistic process rather than above it. The poetic and political are treated as inseparable (Lawless [1993] 2016, 57-58). This research strives to entextualize and retextualize rhetoric with the goal of examining and questioning the constructed nature of cultural accounts (Lawless [1993] 2016, 58). Lawless describes the function of ethnography, saying:

It looks obliquely at all collective arrangements, distant or nearby. It makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian. Ethnography cultivates an engaged clarity like that urged by Virginia Woolf: “Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves?” Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration and is itself part of these processes. Ethnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. (Lawless [1993] 2016, 58)

Lawless also brings up an ongoing debate within the fields of folklore, anthropology, and gender studies: “how do we write ethnography and how does the ethnographer acknowledge [their] role in the field situation?” (Lawless [1993] 2016, 58). I have done my best to navigate this situation through reflexivity while also trying to avoid the tendency of anthropologist to become so reflexive that they direct the spotlight back onto themselves (Lawless [1993] 2016, 58). Lawless, in paraphrasing Stephan Tyler in his book *The Unspeakable*, says that:

Tyler suggests that ethnography should be—at the methodological, the theoretical, and at the presentational levels—dialogic, emergent, evocative, aesthetic through the natural integration of the texts involved, and potentially therapeutic, closely connected with the idea of restorative harmony in its original sense of “ritual substitute.” (Lawless [1993] 2016, 59)

This research aims to create a piece of work that is aesthetic, evocative, and dialogic to the best of the researcher’s ability while staying within scope. More, perhaps, could have been done to better include the voices of the people I spoke with, such as adopting Lawless’s methods of reciprocal ethnography. However, as Lawless (again paraphrasing Tyler) says, “Although postmodern ethnographies will remain incomplete, insufficient,

lacking in some way, Tyler assures us ‘this is not a defect since it is the means that enables transcendence.’” (Lawless [1993] 2016, 59).

Dorothy Noyes’ notions of humble theory (Noyes 2008; 2016) are also key to my analytical approach. I use her ideas and methods in conjunction with reflexivity to acknowledge my role and influence in my research and to counter the tendency of the academic to run rampant with theories that are too far removed from the communities of people being theorized about.

Terms and Definitions

The following section explores concepts such as Neo-Paganism, new age spirituality, vernacular religion, and ambient faith, providing clear definitions for each term. As these ideas often do not have one fixed definition or else are not widely known, this section clarifies the lens through which this research was conducted.

Neo-Paganism and New Age Spirituality

The group of women depicted in this paper come from a variety of religious backgrounds but have all found their way into some form of what I perceive to be Neo-Pagan or new age spirituality. Because there are various definitions of what Neo-Paganism and new age spirituality are, I will clarify how I am using these terms.

I use the terms “Neo-Pagan” and “revival Witchcraft” as defined by Sabina Magliocco in *Witching Culture* (Magliocco 2004). *Neo-Paganism* “designates a movement of new religions that attempt to revive, revitalize, and experiment with aspects of pre-

Christian polytheism” whose goal is “a deeper connection with the sacred, with nature, and with community” (Magliocco 2004, 4). *Revival Witchcraft* is the largest component of Neo-Paganism and has links to English Romanticism, nationalism, and literary and anthropological theory use by occult societies in the late nineteenth century (Magliocco 2004, 5). Magliocco’s work on Neo-Paganism and revival Witchcraft forms the base of understanding and conceptualization of the elements of Neo-Paganism with which I am working. Her case studies of Neo-Paganism on the West Coast of the United States (specifically focusing on San Francisco) in *Witching Culture* reflect what I see and hear from the women I interviewed up and down the West Coast of the U.S. (Magliocco 2004). According to Magliocco, Pagan theologians and Neo-Pagan practitioners reject the idea that Neo-Pagan religions are belief-centered (Magliocco 2012, 17). Modern Paganism is more about being than belief, while “modern Pagan ‘magic’ is in fact a set of techniques for training the imagination by attuning to the elements, phases of the moon, cycle of the season, and emotional connections between inanimate objects” (Magliocco 2012, 18). Experience and praxis are at the core of Neo-Pagan religion, with Pagans focusing on engaging in a participatory relationship with the natural environment (Magliocco 2012, 18).

Additionally, I explore the relationship to new age spiritualities as well. I use the following framework when theorizing about new age spiritualities:

The expression “new age” has been used in the academy since the mid-1980s to describe a sometimes bewildering variety of “holistic” or “mind body spirit” phenomena, including astrology, tarot and other kinds of

divination; practices of possession, channeling and mediumship; magical ideas about multiple bodies, and occult ideas about hidden anatomies; body practices like yoga, tai chi and ch'i kung; popular psychotherapies and counseling ideologies; and forms of healing positioned as either “alternative” or “complementary” to biomedical healthcare, from Reiki to homeopathy. The ontological commitments range from weak transcendence to strong imminence: that is, from “a blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies, and occult psychic phenomena” (York 1995: 34) to a “highly optimistic, celebratory, utopian and spiritual form of humanism” (Heelas 1996: 28) (Sutcliffe and Gilhus [2013] 2014, 3).

My work on the parking goddess and related spiritual practices fills a gap in existing scholarship exploring modern Neo-Paganism and new age spirituality as most scholars focus on the bigger, more “important” practices, rather than the everyday practices (Bennett 1987; Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007). Bennett, when discussing the supernatural, writes about how folklorists are wary of tackling modern beliefs for fear of offending their informants (Bennett 1987, 13). Goldstein references and builds off Bennett’s point, arguing that the rise in rationalistic approaches in the social sciences has “created a notion of supernatural belief as antithetical to modern thought” (Goldstein 2007, 64).

While the study of Neo-Paganism in North America is not new (Adler 2006; Berger 1999; 2003; 2011; Salomonsen 2002; Magliocco 2004; 2012), modern urban deities and modern urban magic in North America have not had much attention given to them, apart from Robert Orsi’s book *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Orsi 1999). In his book, Orsi covers how urban people navigate a complicated religious experience/identity in the middle of a large city. While useful, Orsi does not account for the development of new gods or magic forms that are derived from modern urban

experiences, such as that of parking, nor does he address Neo-Paganism or new age spirituality directly. Additionally, complex boundary issues within the study of religion and new age spirituality have led to new age beliefs and practices remaining “analytically elusive despite their increased visibility in many societies” (Sutcliffe and Gilhus [2013] 2014, 5). Coupled with the fact that new age women outpace men 2-to-1 (Sutcliffe and Gilhus [2013] 2014, 5), my work addresses a gap in modern religious and folklore studies dealing with current women’s Neo-Pagan and new age spiritual practices.

Vernacular Religion and Ambient Faith

The various parking practices discussed in this paper can best be understood under the framework of vernacular religion. Vernacular religion, as defined by Primiano, is “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995, 44). New age spirituality, and in my experiences Neo-Paganism as well, are broad categories of religion and spirituality that contain spiritual components and cultural components. They are often practiced in private or small groups and contain little to no “organized” structures or cohesive religious doctrine as is characteristic of Christianity or other religions with “official” branches. Neo-Paganism and new age spiritualities are almost entirely “folk” religions. In other words, they are defined by how the people who live the religion practice them, rather than through formal doctrine. The various parking practices covered in this paper are examples of vernacular religious practices because they are example of how people incorporate their beliefs in day-to-day life.

How the terms “religion,” “spirituality,” and “vernacular religion” are used are also worth delving into before moving further. Participants generally drew a distinction between “religion” and “spirituality.” Many stated that they were spiritual but not religious. I started to explore works on the concept of being “spiritual but not religious” (Fuller 2001; Ammerman 2013; Wixwat and Saucier 2021), but the topic quickly branched out beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice to say, more and more people are saying they are “spiritual but not religious” (Sutcliffe and Gilhus [2013] 2014, 5), and many scholars are attempting to unpack the meaning and social implications of this phrase. For the purposes of this work, I find it more appropriate to view this response within the frameworks of vernacular religion. The defining difference between “religion” and “spirituality” for many of the people I spoke with was whether it was organized. Christianity was perceived to be religion, but nonorganized, personal, and private practices were more likely to be considered “spirituality.” It was the “lived” quality of the practice that deemed it more likely to be “spiritual.” Because of this, I find it most useful from an analytical perspective to refer to the various spiritual or religious parking practices in this paper as “vernacular religious parking practices.”

Additionally, “the boundaries between expressions of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’” regarding new age spiritualities is often quite blurred (Sutcliff, 4-5). Astrology, yoga, and acupuncture, for example, are widely accepted and not thought of as indicators of “religion” by most people. Material culture items reflecting these beliefs are common as well, such as jewelry based on your astrological sun sign or “keep calm and meditate” coffee

mugs. Matthew Engelke poses the concept of “ambient faith” as a way of navigating the space between public and private religion (Engelke 2012). He explores “ambience” as something with a “more distinct sense of what it is in the background” compared to “context” (Engelke 2012, 158). Engelke uses the example of a church to illustrate his point, noting that “it is the ambience of a church—rather than the context—that inspires a contemplative mood” (Engelke 2012, 158). Ambience, and ambient faith, sit in the background at the crossroads between public and private (both of which are always relative). While Engelke’s work explored the use of angels as Christmas decorations as a display of ambient faith, I find that the concept of “ambient faith” can be extended to include what I might think of as “cultural” displays of faith, especially regarding material culture. Across Portland, you will find displays of witch-themed items, crystals, star-and-moon motifs, tarot card themed items, astrological-sign merch, herbal bath treatments with quips about “love spells,” dream catchers, pentagram jewelry, essential oils, and various wellness treatments. The line between what is Neo-Pagan and what is new age is routinely blurred, as are the boundaries between aesthetics, culture, and religion. The combination of these elements creates and normalizes a pervasive Neo-Pagan and new age culture and religion. The women and practices in this thesis sit against this background.

Liminality

Rooted in anthropology and later embraced by folklore scholars, the concept of liminality represents a state of transition and ambiguity. The term comes from the Latin word “limen,” meaning threshold, and refers to the in-between phases of rituals, rites of

passage, and cultural transformations. As we navigate the threshold between distinct spaces or states, liminality is a way to view our experiences and examine our narratives. In “The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure” (Turner 1969), Victor Turner describes liminality as a phase in the ritual process where individuals or groups experience a suspension of normal social structures and norms. This “betwixt and between” stage, characterized by ambiguity and *communitas*, offers a unique space for new meanings, identities, and symbols to emerge. Liminality as it relates to cars and parking is explored in more detail in chapter two.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into four main chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter breaks down the religious context from which *Asphalta* and the other vernacular religious parking practices emerge. It discusses the role feminist spirituality and the magazine *Women’s Spirit* play in the cultural construction of religious practices like the ones present in this research. It also touches upon the relationship between Catholic saint practices and *Asphalta*, drawing comparisons between Mary, St. Anthony, St. Agnes, and St. Gladys. The second chapter examines the concept of cars as liminal spaces and the vulnerability that this creates for women. It begins by laying the groundwork for conceptualizing gender before moving into how gender intersects with car use. This chapter looks at the nuanced relationship between gender, vulnerability, the sexualization of women in relation to cars, and the role of the patriarchy and masculinity in constructing women’s fears of sexual assault when parking. The third chapter moves into more detail about how the women

interviewed experience vulnerability when parking. It explores the difference between parking while alone versus parking with children, as well as the role of the car as a temporary haven to mitigate anxieties of vulnerability when sitting in a parked car. The fourth chapter brings the conversation back to the function of the vernacular religious parking practices as coping mechanisms for dealing with gendered vulnerability. In this chapter, the use of vernacular religious parking practices for stress relief, family bonding, protection from violence, manifesting prosperity, and countering the ideals of cultural masculinity are explored. Lastly, the thesis concludes with a chapter dedicated to summarizing the main arguments of the research while exploring limitations and directions for further research.

Chapter 1: Asphalta, Women's Spirit, and Saints

Asphalta and the other vernacular religious parking practices discussed in this thesis are born from the feminist spirituality movement and saint practices, thereby reflecting distinct elements of both. This chapter explores the relationship between feminist spiritual movements, *Women's Spirit* magazine, and the women's personal religious practices to better understand the means of creation, evolution, and transmission of Asphalta as a folkloric practice. It also delves into the relationship between Catholic saints and Asphalta, thus situating Asphalta alongside existing vernacular religious practices. Understanding the spiritual movement that Asphalta stems from and her relationship to existing (and better known) vernacular religious practices provides cultural context within which to perform analysis.

Recontextualization as a Method of Feminist Spiritual Cultural Creation

In my observation, people who hold new age beliefs will have their own personal assortment of practices or phenomena they find themselves drawn to, by no means being drawn to every single one. The idea of consciously choosing which elements of culture and religion one wants to incorporate or leave behind appears to be baked into parts of the feminist spiritual movement. Take for example this excerpt from the opening statement of the very first issue of *Women's Spirit*, a magazine that Anne identified as being foundational in the formation of both her feminist and her religious thinking:

“This is a crucial time for women. We have begun to understand and work through much of our oppression. We have made radical changes in our lives – and we are becoming aware of the immensity of these changes. We

are also seeing the directions our new ways of living are taking us. When we realize the political implications of all our struggles, we know that patriarchy cannot withstand our changes; something is going to happen. We are feeling stirrings inside us that tell us that what we are making is nothing less than a new culture.

What women are doing by exploring the spiritual sides of their lives is essential for the building of a new women's culture. We must decide what we will take with us on this creative journey. What parts of our experiences are valuable and needed for our continued struggle? What behavior, thought patterns, values, images, illustrations, and artifacts of the non feminist culture will we choose to leave behind? As we continue to tear down the institutions and relationships that oppress us, we are also building, making, creating. Because this process of taking and leaving, making a new culture, is so deep, profound, and all inclusive we are calling it spiritual. The sharing and comparing in that process is the reason for this magazine." (Brown et al. 1974)

This statement illustrates the intersection of politics, lived realities, activism, theory, femininity, gender, and spirituality often held by women like Anne and Katherine, as well as by Marny or authors Grey and Penelope. It advocates for the conscious creation of a new culture, specifically stating that women must choose what "behavior, thought patterns, values, images, illustrations, and artifacts" they wish to recenter in their new spirituality and culture – in other words, the recontextualization of various texts as a method of culture creation. I argue that *Women's Spirit* is advocating for conscious recontextualization as a deliberate part of second wave feminism and feminist spirituality. In turn, vernacular religious parking practices stemming from this culture are a product of this feminist spiritual recontextualization as part of the process of creation.

I argue that many of these women recontextualize or recenter elements of various religions when constructing their religious identity. This idea is borrowed from Bauman

and Briggs's work on poetics and performance in which they discuss recontextualization or recentering as part of the process of entextualization and decontextualization (of which recontextualization is a part) in relation to performance (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 72–75). In other words, I argue that, in constructing their own spiritual and religious identities the women recenter pieces of their former religious and personal experiences within a new context, thus creating a new spiritual or religious identity that better aligns with their worldview and what they want from their religion or spiritual practice. Viewing the construction of religious and spiritual identity in this manner allows me to break down the women's micronarratives by examining the various "original" texts and the new context they have been placed in. Subsequently, I can draw conclusions based on which texts the women themselves have chosen to highlight and recombine to gain a deeper understanding of how they might be constructing their religious and spiritual identities. This method of constructing personalized religious and spiritual identity is reflected in the personalization of their vernacular religious parking practices as seen later on in this thesis.

I was drawn to this analytical approach for three reasons. Firstly, many of my participants talked about how they liked to draw from many different sources when it comes to their religious or spiritual practices, often emphasizing the importance of making something their own. Secondly, this practice of tailoring together a religious or spiritual tradition seemed in line with new age practices, seeing that they are comprised of "a sometimes bewildering variety of 'holistic' or 'mind body spirit' phenomena" (Sutcliffe and Gilhus [2013] 2014, 3).

Understanding the process of recontextualizing and recentering various religious experiences is key when it comes to looking at how gender and queerness shape these women's approaches towards their vernacular religious practices and religion and spirituality more generally. By using recontextualization as a lens for analysis, it becomes possible to explore why the women chose to recenter or leave behind various elements of their religious and spiritual practices to better represent themselves.

When I asked Katherine to share about her religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, she readily broke into performance and began sharing a narrative of her religious journey through life, starting with how she was raised and ending in the present day. Her narrative is as follows:

They're always changing. (laughter) I used to believe all kinds of things that have just fallen away from me. Praise God for menopause. Like, no, seriously, menopause is a whole different territory. And so a lot of crap falls away. And a lot of worries and concerns. You get new ones. So I was raised in a Christian tradition. My dad was descended from heavy duty Lutheran theologians. And so I—I got all the beautiful poetry of the Bible. But I always, I think I always knew that, like, organized religion is like, no... There were, I actually—actually I remember, like, being in church, I was about thirteen and there was a prayer that you—that you had to repeat and it was like, “Lord, I am not—I am unfit to pick up the crumbs from under your table.” And I went “that is not true.” And that was it for me. That was like, okay, no, this is not, this is not my place. So. But I also was like really, really interested in spiritual life and having a spiritually focused life and having a spiritual perspective on life, which is obviously very different from having a religion. I think that practices and rituals and prayers and all those things that can be really powerful and really useful. And I do use them. I usually make them up myself now. You know. Like I, I just have learned the power of just using my own—and actually it's even more powerful if you make it up, if you're working with yourself and your own energy. But I used to

believe in things like reincarnation and of one God. And now I'm like, "eh. I don't know." I'm in the "I don't know" phase of my spiritual development. And that's okay. I did go to a school for psychic healers. And I learned a lot of really amazing and fantastic things that I still use today. I learned, I have a meditation practice that I use from that. And I learned how to ground for my first chakra. Really powerful thing to do. So those are all, there's a lot of stuff from that that I still use. But in terms of like—and that's spiritual, because I'm working with the energy. But I just kind of think everything is energy and everything is God. That's really my—that's my bottom line.

Here Katherine links her experience of her spirituality to her experience of menopause. To use a common colloquialism, many menopausal women in my community "give fewer f*cks" after menopause, something they express to be freeing or otherwise liberating. Medical literature has explored how spirituality and religion impact the experience of the symptoms of menopause (Pimenta et al. 2012; 2014; Steffen and Soto 2011; Süss and Ehlert 2020), but has generally glossed over how the symptoms of menopause change people's religious and spiritual experiences. Consider, however, the work David Hufford has done on experience-centered folk belief wherein he argues that bodily experience can be the basis of supernatural experiences (Hufford 1995). The bodily experience of menopause could cause a change in the experience of spirituality. For Katherine, things falling away from her as part of her menopausal experience has resulted in a shift in her spiritual beliefs as well. In other words, her bodily and cultural experience of menopause directly influences her understanding and practice of her spirituality. In this manner, her gender and her body inform her perspective on religion and spirituality.

Over the course of her narrative, Katherine mentions a variety of cultural and religious artifacts, or texts, that she has chosen to recontextualize in her personal spiritual

practice in accordance with her values. Katherine realized, however, that Christianity was not where she belonged, so she took the poetry of the Bible, removed it from its original context, and recentered it into her own spiritual practice. Likewise, she recontextualized a meditation practice she learned from her time at a school for psychic healers into her current spiritual practice, in essence creating a bespoke practice comprised of many different pieces of recontextualized cultural, religious, and spiritual ideas and practices. This process, in turn, is impacted by her experience of menopause, as she lets go of various cultural and spiritual artifacts and replaces them with new ones. Thus, she has created a set of personal spiritual and religious beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have been shaped by her experiences as a woman.

While Katherine's spirituality is shaped by her experience of menopause, Anne's narrative about her religious and spiritual journey is more focused on feminism, femininity, and goddess spirituality.

So, um, I consider myself Catholic culturally, sort of like how Jewish people say they're not, you know, they don't practice Judaism, but they're—they're cultural. It's—and I, that's how I think of myself, that I was so steeped in it and it had a big effect on me. Um, and then spirituality, I would say... um, that's how would I put it... Um, not aligned with any organized religion. I'm pretty female centric in my, uh—and earth centric in my spiritual beliefs and have been for a very long time. Um, and so I, I sort of veer towards agnostic to, um, sort of matriarchal kind of stuff. And I also have trips. I really am a mixed bag here. Uh, I, I do use some of these practices for meditation.

This connection between “female,” “matriarchal kind of stuff,” and spirituality comes up very frequently for Anne when describing her vernacular religious parking practice. Over the course of our interview, Anne repeatedly shared different stories,

practices, and bits of knowledge related to her spiritual development over the years, many of which were tied to goddesses, goddess spirituality, nuns, midwifery, Mother Mary, feminist beliefs and education, and the role of women in spirituality. For example, in a discussion about a litany to Mary, she mentions that she, in essence, has all “these, like, different personas, which are sort of multiple goddesses, right?” She also mentions how “they” (and by “they” I am fairly certain she is referring to *Women’s Spirit* magazine) “talked about Mary being—really that she came from Isis and that it was the early Christians’ way of appropriating goddess religion and converting people to Christianity.”

A short while later, after mentioning a story about a Black Madonna, she sums up her whole perspective on Mary, goddess religion, and the Black Madonna by saying:

So I loved all that stuff. Like I was like [a] rebel and I liked all the sort of going back and reappropriating it for myself. I don’t even know. You know, reimagining—I like that word better. Reimagining Mary for ourselves and taking it back. So that’s [why] I like Our Lady of Asphalta.¹

Here Anne explains that her process of reappropriating or reimagining Mary (what I might call recontextualizing Mary) is a way of “taking back” elements of religion that she feels have been contorted or removed from their original context. In a way, Anne’s discussion of Christians appropriating goddess religion is an example of the recontextualizing process itself, except that Anne does not agree with the process of Christians taking goddess religion and recontextualizing it for their own purposes, so she

¹ Anne had previously linked Mary and other “Our Lady of” figures to her vernacular religious parking practice “Our Lady of Asphalta.”

“takes it back” and attempts to recontextualize for herself in a way that aligns better with her worldview. Thus, not only is Anne actively engaged in the process of creating her own spiritual practice and set of beliefs via recontextualization (spurred on by *Women’s Spirit* magazine’s advocacy for recontextualization as a method of feminist spiritual cultural creation), but she is also doing so in a manner that reinforces and reproduces her own feminist and goddess spirituality leaning beliefs. In this way, Anne’s gender, and gender as a construct, informs her production and reproduction of her spirituality.

Anne:

The other thing is that occasionally we would pray this litany to Mary which I think is related to Our Lady of Asphalta. So, there’s a litany to Mary which just goes on and on and on about all these different personas of Mary. And you say like “Mary, most merciful, pray for us. Our lady most blah, blah, blah, pray for us.” And so there’s all these different personas, which is sorta multiple goddesses, right?

And so, I always liked that prayer because it was more interesting and we prayed it during May. And then, as I got more and more feminist and more around—I was a lot around. I somewhat identified as a lesbian and I worked at a feminist bookstore when I went to college. 1975. I read this magazine that came out around then called *Women’s Spirit*. And I sort of knew this stuff anyways, but they just talked about Mary being... really that she came from Isis and that it was the early Christians’ way of appropriating goddess religion and converting people to Christianity.

And then, like I grew up in a Polish Catholic neighborhood—my parish was called Polish Catholic, outside of Detroit. And they used to have—So, ironically, the Polish Catholics worship a Mary who is the black Madonna. So, they have pictures of this black Madonna with the baby (a black Jesus) in their homes. Anyways, I loved all that stuff. Like, I was [a] rebel and I liked all the sort of going back and re-appropriating it for myself. I don’t even know. You know, reimagining. I like that word better. Reimagining Mary for ourselves and taking it back. So that’s [why] I like Our Lady of

Asphalta. All right, that's one thing. So, there's the "Our Lady" part. And then the second part. Am I talkin' too much?

Personal identity thread through these narratives as well, specifically regarding Anne's – and Sarah's, as you will see – tendencies to make their religion their own in part through the blending of different beliefs and practices. In her narrative above, Anne moves from talking about Mary to talking about how her time in college changed her perspective on Mary. She mentions working at a feminist bookstore and becoming more feminist herself, as well as exploring her sexuality through identifying as a lesbian, as part of the process that led her to question and queer her understanding of Catholicism.

Anne queers her religious experience by recontextualizing elements of Catholicism that counter traditional heteropatriarchal narratives, fitting them into the culture of queer feminist spirituality. This connects back to the theme of Asphalta and other vernacular parking practices popping up among people with queer identities, specifically lesbians. Anne began exploring her religious experiences at the same time she was exploring her sexual identity and feminism, and she links the experiences. Grey and Penelope, in their book about *Found Goddesses*, link their sexual orientation to the creation of Asphalta and other found goddesses. The women who told Anne about Asphalta were a lesbian couple as well. Yet Anne did not take their practice verbatim. Instead, she made it into something her own that reflected her religious experiences.

The process of recontextualization as a method of constructing personalized spiritual practices was present for Sarah and Ticia as well, both of whom indicated a sort of

“collecting” process when it comes to developing their understanding of spirituality. Marny and Jill both indicated a more formal schooling in their spiritual practices, although they drew from experiences outside of their education as part of personalizing their practices. Jill, for example, uses the Law of Attraction, or manifestation,² as her process of finding parking, but she has combined this with the image and concept of the actress Doris Day.

Really, like I said, it’s very simple and I was trying to remember when I started doing this so many years ago. I can’t remember, but it’s based on the Law of Attraction and basically—and you’re probably way too young to know who Doris Day is, but Doris Day was in the 40s and 50s a movie star whose life was perfect. Everything that could go right in her life went right and everything was perfect. So, I started so many years ago, I can’t even remember. [I’d be in the] parking lot saying “Doris Day parking, Doris Day parking” And then I had nieces and nephews who are all grown, but when they were little—and I have triplets. And with the triplets especially, when they would be in the back seat, we’d pull into a parking lot and I’d have these three little voices in the back seat going “DORIS DAY PARKING! DORIS DAY PARKING! DORIS DAY PARKING!” And I’ve said it most of my life and I always say Doris Day parking!

That is— [Jill unintelligible] Oh, keep going!

Well, I was really gonna say it’s just that simple. There’s not a lot to it. It’s all based on the Law of Attraction. What you put out there, you know. And Doris Day had the perfect life. Everything about her was perfect. Everything she did was perfect. Everything she tried to do was perfect. So that’s where it came from. I don’t think the kids—I don’t think my triplets who are now 25 have any idea who Doris Day is but they still know what Doris Day parking looks like.

For Jill, Doris Day serves almost as a shortcut to get herself in the right frame of mind for the Law of Attraction to help manifest parking. By imagining the actress’s perfect

² This concept is explored in more detail in chapter four. Suffice to say, manifestation is the act of attracting something to oneself through the power of positive thinking.

life and image, perhaps she will attract a similar sort of ease and perfection into her own life when parking. For context, Doris Day was an American actress, singer, and animal rights activist who was a huge Hollywood film star in the 1950s and 1960s (Braun [1991] 2010). She was “simultaneously virginal yet sexy, career-focused yet domestic, elegant yet approachable; she didn’t just ‘enjoy being a girl’ – she presented an uncomplicated, night-mythical image of womanhood” (Romano 2019). She was characterized as a wholesome, all-American virgin: the ultimate girl next door (Braun [1991] 2010; Day and Hotchner 1976; Hotchner 1975a; 1975b; 1975c; 1976; 1982; Romano 2019).

Day was the archetype of the mid-century modern woman, her head looking towards the future, but with her feet firmly planted in the conservative past. It was an unfailingly seductive depiction of a deceptively simplistic view of womanhood – and by pulling it off as well as she did, even today, she still lures us into believing that the myth is real (Romano 2019).

Despite being a symbol of perfection and mythical womanhood, her life was filled with behind-the-scenes hardship (Braun [1991] 2010; Day and Hotchner 1976; Hotchner 1975a; 1975b; 1975c; 1976; 1982; Romano 2019). The public, however, is seemingly more interested in Doris Day as a symbol than as a real life, complicated woman who dealt with violence, injury and illness, and issues with money. By taking an idealized, hyperfeminine, near-mythical depiction of the ultimate American girl next door and incorporating this image into her personal spiritual practice, Jill has tied her spiritual practice to ideas about femininity. Thus, while Katherine’s experience of spirituality and religion is shaped by the physicality of menopause and Anne’s practice is shaped by her involvement with political

feminism, Jill's practice draws on a hegemonic depiction of femininity and the perfection of the ideal American woman.

The way in which these women conceptualize their gender goes on to impact the way they move through the world. It also influences their approach towards spiritual and religious practices. For some, like Marny and Anne, religion is tied directly to the cultural experiences of being a woman. For others, like Jill and Sarah, the connection is there but is less overt in their own words. In some cases, one's own proclivity towards feminist and queer approaches to life shows through in their approach to religion and spirituality as well. In all cases, however, gender informs how religion and spirituality are experienced, and by extension, how vernacular religious parking practices are experienced.

Gender performance and identity are an inherent part of vernacular religious parking practices. Gender performance, the perception of this performance, and the associated cultural reaction to this performance impacts how a person moves about society and how they experience and chose to navigate spaces such as parking lots, parking garages, and other types of parking spaces. Additionally, their spiritual and religious response is informed by a collection of factors, such as their own gender identity and whether they feel this fits in with their religion of choice, how their own gender identity shapes their perspectives and opinions on religion as a whole, and how they have been treated as a result of their gender performance in the past by their religions.

Patron Saints

The connection between *Women's Spirit*, feminist spiritual movements, and the vernacular religious parking practices are important, but so are the connection between Asphalta and Catholic saints. In her interview, Anne repeatedly drew comparisons between Asphalta (whom she refers to as “Our Lady of Asphalta”) and Mary, mother of Jesus, as well as her variants such as Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Waterloo Bay, and Guadalupe. The following is an extended excerpt from Anne in which she directly and indirectly links Asphalta to Mary, to saints, and to Catholicism through statements and micronarratives – all filled with a general theme of personalizing, reclaiming, and queering her religious experience:

So, patron saints—where did I come from? Was sort of this medieval practice that they start throwing it out after Vatican II, which was this big meeting. They had only had Vatican I like hundreds of years before. And then they had Vatican II and they were re-examining Catholic practices and trying to make a more, you know, update them. Anyways, a patron saint is like... Like St. Christopher is in charge of travelers. So you pray, if you're going to go on a trip, you pray to St. Christopher. If you lose something, you pray to St. Anthony. St. Jude is for lost causes which is why there's St. Jude's hospital for hopeless cases, like seriously ill children. So all these different saints are like patron saints, and you can pray to them if you have a special problem. So that's sort of like this Asphalta thing. Sorta seems like that, too.

So, I'm going to tell you one—my favorite patron saint's story—that's, like, silly and popular, too. It's St. Anthony. There's like a formal prayer to St. Anthony, right? But this friend of mine who was also Catholic and informal said “oh, when you lose something, here's the informal, quick prayer to St. Anthony” which I still say to this day. So, if you lose something, you say “Tony, Tony, look around, something's lost, and can't be found,” and you turn around at circles. It's like a jump rope rhyme. So anyways, that's another informal prayer to a saint who is in charge of one thing: lost items. And so I sort of think—In my mind, Our Lady of Asphalta is in charge of

one thing. She's like a saint. And I don't think of her so much as the goddess of (though a little), but, more like a saint that's in charge of something, and you can appeal to her to help you.

Anne gives context and scope to what Our Lady of Asphalta has control over by comparing her to saint practices. She mentions St. Anthony, the saint in charge of lost items. St. Anthony has both a formal and informal prayer, the latter of which is passed colloquially from person to person rather than in an organized religious setting. The informal prayer to St. Anthony, like Anne's prayer to Our Lady of Asphalta, rhymes. By comparing St. Anthony to Our Lady of Asphalta, Anne alludes to "Hail Asphalta, full of Grace, help me find a parking place" as an informal prayer to a saint for aid with parking. Both informal prayers can then be looked at as examples of vernacular religious saint practices.

Anne was not the only one who linked Asphalta to Catholic saints. During the preliminary research for this project, I encountered numerous mentions of a parking goddess on blog posts, comments, tweets, and Reddit threads. Many of the prayers followed the "Hail Asphalta" form, although the alternative spelling "Asphaltia" occurred frequently along with the name "Squat." With further online exploration, however, a Christian parking prayer to Mary following the same pattern surfaced: "Hail Mary full of Grace, help me find a parking place."

Sarah had a similar prayer, except for someone named "Agnes." In this case, it appears that "Agnes" refers to St. Agnes, a Catholic virgin martyr and the patron saint of engaged couples, victims of sexual abuse, and those seeking chastity and purity (Basilica

2021; University of Notre Dame n.d.). Marny also mentioned that a friend of hers uses the same rhyme structure, praying instead to “Gladys.” This is seemingly a reference to St. Gladys, a Welsh Catholic saint. Anne’s explanation, coupled with Sarah’s use of St. Agnes, Marny’s friend’s use of St. Gladys, and the interchange between Asphalta, Mary, and various saint names in the informal prayer “Hail [name] full of grace, help me find a parking space,” paint a picture of the new age, Neo-Pagan goddess Asphalta intermingling with largely Catholic saints and prayers to Mary to create a vernacular religious expression and practice dedicated to addressing the gendered urban experience of parking.

Manifestation

Jill’s use of “Doris Day” parking as mentioned earlier brings up the concept of spiritual manifestation. Manifestation as a modern religious concept is ubiquitous in American culture but is not well studied in academic literature. *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) is widely recognized as having popularized the practice, although other books like the *Law of Attraction* (Losier 2007) are common as well. *Women’s Health* magazine, for example, has at least six online articles on manifesting (Tempera 2022a; 2022b; Gomez and Pelto 2022; Tempera and Talbert 2023; Pelto 2023; Canavan 2023), *Cosmopolitan* has at least thirteen online articles specifically on manifestation, and *Vox* has also written an online article detailing the subject under the tag “money” (Jennings 2020). This is by no means an exhaustive survey. The prevalence of manifestation in women’s specific pop culture, as well as the frequency with which terms like “witchcraft,” “spell,” “new age,” “ritual,” and

“astrology” pop up when discussing manifestation, shows that this topic is very prevalent in women-centered spaces. Jill defined the concept, saying:

My knowledge of the Law of Attraction is it's a universal law like gravity. And you get what you focus on and that doesn't necessarily mean just your words or your thoughts. It means your feelings, your vibrations. Once you raise your vibrations to that which you're trying to attract, it automatically comes to you. Again, simply put, that's the Law of Attraction.

Jill's definition of manifestation is a common one. The Law of Attraction stems from *The Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Three Initiates 1908) and is suspected to have been written by William Walker Atkinson, a pioneer of the New Thought movement (Atkinson, Initiates, and Deslippe 2011). Before the publication of *The Kybalion*, Atkinson also wrote *Thought Vibration: Or, the Law of Attraction in the Thought World* (Atkinson 1906). When Jill talks about “vibrations,” she speaks to the idea that “all is in vibration—the higher the vibration, the higher position in the scale” (Three Initiates 1908, 30). The world is constructed of “matter,” “energy,” “mind,” and “spirit,” all of which have a vibrational frequency. “Higher” vibrations are associated with better things, likely due to the “Spirit” having the highest vibration (Three Initiates 1908, 30). Because of this, the phrase “raise your vibrations” can be heard with some regularity among people who use manifestation and the Law of Attraction. The Law of Attraction (where like attracts like) coupled with the idea that one can control one's vibrational frequency, creates the possibility of manifesting specific outcomes in life. By raising one's vibrations, one can attract positive outcomes, such as wealth, health, love, or even a good parking spot. Sarah elaborated on how manifestation works, saying:

I think manifestation helps you focus on—helps you see things. And I teach this actually now with my job (I'm a therapeutic behavior specialist) and I have a lot of clients who think negatively. They're the opposite like "Oh, it's never gonna work out." And part of what I do is teach them how to change how they think. So, if you see something, you think "That means I'm gonna have a bad day," or "It's not gonna work out," then you're only focused on what is not gonna work. And then the only thing you can see is what's not gonna work because that is all you're telling yourself. But if you say "It's gonna work out," you're gonna find and you're gonna notice things that are what you're focused on. So, that's what I've noticed. And I don't know if there is, you know. I don't know there is a higher power up there, and, you know, is providing parking spaces, but I believe that the power of manifestation is powerful and that's what I've seen. That we see it quicker if we believe that it's gonna be there.

Sarah weaves together a narrative discussing the role manifestation plays in people's personal lives and her working life. Not only does she use and value manifestation as a spiritual and practical self-help tool, but she teaches this tool to her clients. In this way, she has painted a picture of manifestation leading to emotional, psychological, material, and spiritual happiness, success, and well-being.

Manifestation is yet another point of connection between New Thought, Christianity, new age, and Neo-Pagan religious movements as they appear in this community's vernacular religious parking practices. While some participants describe their vernacular religious parking practice as relying on manifestation or patron saints, the instances of use and the functions of the practices have much in common. The role of the practices, irrespective of the means, are aimed at mitigating a sense of gendered vulnerability. This sense of gendered vulnerability that is discussed at length in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: The Vulnerability of Cars as Liminal Spaces

As in-between and transient spaces, cars can be remarkably isolating. They are stored in remote, often precarious, locations – at the side of the road, in expansive surface lots, within poorly lit multi-level parking structures. Historically, women’s use of cars as a means of transitioning from home and the private sphere into work and the public sphere has been met with cultural backlash (Tye 2005, 223–24). The threat of sexual assault and violence towards women who use cars alone encourages women not to stray too far away from home (Tye 2005, 1415; Malti-Douglas 2007, 1415). The threat has created an environment of risk for women as they move between the private and public spheres. In other words, the liminality of cars presents an inherent vulnerability to the women who use them. This chapter seeks to frame the conversation around gender, examine the liminality of cars, discuss the relationship between property and personal safety, and explore the intersection between the two through the lens of gendered vulnerability, masculinity, and modernity.

Theorizing Gender

This chapter leans on the idea that gender impacts women’s relationships with mobility and safety, even though not all the women interviewed conceive of gender the same way. Most of them are gender-nonconforming, questioning their gender, or are themselves not heterosexual. Some approach gender with an intellectual or feminist lens, while others do not. Making sense of multiple participant viewpoints for the sake of academic discourse is, at times, a chaotic process. To provide a theoretic and contextual

understanding of how gender is framed in this thesis, this section situates individual perspectives on gender within the larger conversation of gender theory. The ideas around gender presented in this research rely on the understanding of gender as something you *do*, as Butler explained in the preface to the re-release of *Gender Trouble* in 2006, saying “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 2006a, xv). The concept of performativity has been elaborated on further by Butler in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Butler 1993) and has been taken up by gender theorists more generally.

The concept of performativity leads to the related conversation regarding the difference between someone’s internal gender identity, gender expression, and how they are gendered by others. *Gender identity* can be defined as “each person’s internal and individual experience of gender,” while *gender expression* can be defined as “how a person publicly presents or expresses their gender” (“Appendix B: Glossary for Understanding Gender Identity and Expression | Ontario Human Rights Commission” n.d.). How someone is *gendered* refers to how a person’s gender is externally perceived by members of society. In some cases, this may result in people being *misgendered*, wherein an individual is thought to be a gender that is different than their gender identity.

The above terminology is important when understanding the nuanced relationship to gender held by some of the women interviewed. While not everyone uses gender theory to inform their perception and understanding of their gender, Katherine, Anne, and

Marny each indicated in their own words that they were genderqueer or in some way questioning their gender. They all used varying degrees of gender theory or ideas informed by gender theory to explain their relationship and understanding of their gender. However, Katherine's response to my query about her gender and sexuality was by far the longest and most detailed. Below is the uninterrupted transcription of her response, including follow-up questions from me and her subsequent responses:

I have self-identified as bisexual since probably I was about 11. When I looked around and went "Oh, I have to choose. No, I don't want to choose. I want everyone." And then I learned there was a word for that and said that I said "Oh, okay, that's my word." As I grew up and went through life, I noticed that—and this has gotten worse, I think, over time—that bisexuals are like the ones that get banished to the corner it's like "You guys suck. You're not really anything. Go over there." And which I find kind of annoying. Which has actually had me kind of consider re-upping on that identity. In the interim I went "Oh, queer, that sounds really good," because it's nice and open and it lets you be whoever you are at any given moment no matter, you know, just depending on what's happening in your life at that time. So, I identified as queer for a long time. I've been married twice to men and had a child with a man and I've had other relationships, too. And so now I've been—just lately I've actually been thinking about this whole bisexual thing. I don't like being on the bottom of the pile. It's a perfectly good journey. So, I don't know.

How do you identify with your gender or what gender do you identify as?

You know, I just had a big fight with one of my best friends. I think it's probably one of the few fights we've only ever had. She said "Where do you think you are on the gender continuum?" I said "I think I'm right in the middle." And she was like "What? You're one of the most femme-presenting people I've ever met." And I'm like "What?" And we had a little knockdown. I was like, I said "What are you talking about?" And she—I would have put her right in the middle, too, because we have things, like we can fix cars. There's like a lot of, like, masculine to traditionally masculine things that we have our hands all over, right? And then we have the other

side where we can make beautiful dresses and we like beautiful dresses and we like to play dress up. Neither of us feels required. I wear makeup if I'm going to party maybe. If I'm going to the theater maybe. You know what I mean? So, I have been very fortunate in my life that I wasn't like. I didn't feel like I had to do the conventional feminine type things. I actually say thank you every day. And that's just a matter of the time period and where I was. How I was brought up, where I was born and the particular time that I was just allowed that freedom.

Do you mind if I ask where you were brought up?

I grew up on the East Coast. It was born in New York City and then grew up in around there to an educated, highly educated family with very—mostly left-leaning political habits. So anyway, that was a very interesting experience. I went to a women's writing workshop a couple of times and one of the get-to-know-you exercises that they did was, initially, was to line everybody up and say, "okay, now put yourself on that"—they'd read Adrienne Rich's gender continuum thing and then they'd say, "okay, so now put yourself there." It was interesting to see people like kind of jockey for where they wanted to be. I would have put myself right in the middle and if anybody bumped me this way, I would like go and be right in the middle again. And it's really, like, for me, it's never been about presentation. It's always been about how do I feel inside, you know. And I think for a lot of—like we live in a presentation culture, right? Everything is very much like what you look like and how other people see you. And I have also been very fortunately free of a lot of that.

Katherine's experience at the writing workshop, as well as her argument with her friend, emphasize how she feels about where she sits on the gender spectrum. There is a disconnect between her experience of gender internally and the cultural pressure to "present" gender in a contextually appropriate manner. In other words, the gender someone identifies as having, the gender someone tries to perform in public, and the gender that other people assume someone is — and how they treat that person accordingly — are not always in alignment.

Katherine dives into gender from a more academic lens by mentioning Adrienne Rich and by noting the difference between gender presentation and internal gender identity. Adrienne Rich wrote a lot about identity, sexuality, and gender. Her work in the 1970s and 1980s were central in the second-wave feminist movement (Poetry Foundation n.d.). Katherine seems to reference Rich's article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (Rich 1980) where she mentions a lesbian continuum. Katherine makes sure to emphasize, both explicitly and with a story, that her gender presentation and the perception of her gender are not always the same as how she feels inside. This shows that Katherine's awareness of her gender, and the frameworks she uses to conceptualize it, are rooted to some extent in feminist literature and second wave feminist thought. Thus, political and academic ideas are tied into her experience of gender. In this instance, second wave feminism refers to the political movement beginning in North America in the mid-1960s. While the earlier feminist movement, also known as first wave feminism, focused on securing voting rights and educational and employment opportunities for women, the second wave focused on transforming women's sexual and family roles (Kramarae and Spender 2000, 819). It "challenged male domination not only in politics, education, and employment, but also in the 'private' realm of family and sexual relations" (Kramarae and Spender 2000, 819).

Anne's understanding of her gender was similarly rooted in feminist works. Anne's response was much shorter than Katherine's, but she also included queer terminology in her statements. "So, I am a woman and I've been married to a man for 30 years. And I

would say that I identify as bisexual and a white nonconforming gender nonconforming.” These terms are born from the second wave feminist movement in the U.S. Interestingly, Anne was also the only person to mention their race when talking about their experience of gender and sexuality, leading me to believe that Anne is likely educated on intersectionality or anti-racist works as well.

Later in our interview, Anne added a little more information about her exploration of her sexuality in the middle of a longer narrative response (quoted earlier at length) about religion and spirituality. “So um, and then as I got more and more feminist. [...] And I somewhat identified as a lesbian and was around—like, I worked at a feminist bookstore when I went to college, 1975.” I noticed that Anne’s preferred identity terms have also changed with time, much like Katherine’s. Anne moved from “lesbian” in her time at college to “bisexual” now. This reflects a development in personal identity alongside the shifts in queer studies and queer movements. Additionally, Anne’s discussions about working in a feminist bookstore in the mid-70s would reflect active involvement with second wave feminist scholarship. Anne’s concept of her identity, like Katherine’s, was directly informed by feminist scholarship and evolved in accordance with the development of gender and queer studies as well. For both women, places containing feminist writing (Katherine’s writing workshop and Anne’s feminist bookstore) were mentioned in relation to their exploration about their gender or sexual identities.

Marny also spoke about her journey of understanding her gender, but said that it’s a much more recent movement:

So, my gender identity is feminine. However, it's interesting, no one's ever asked me to like talk about my gender because it's always assumed. But I have recently, in the past year and a half, two years started to welcome the use of the pronouns because I am really intrigued about information that I'm getting about how the binary is harmful. And I have always identified as fairly feminine and excited about calling myself a woman and all that goes with that. However, I find that fairly limiting sometimes. So, I've decided to, like, crack the door open and investigate that a little bit. Baby steps.

And I'm a mother and I'm a partner and my sexuality is interesting. I've been in a monogamous heterosexual relationship for 27 years. And yeah, my wedding anniversary is coming right up. And also, I'm not straight, so there's that.

Note Marny's choice of the word "feminine" to describe her gender. In academic literature, femininity is often considered a socially constructed collection of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with women, rather than a gender in and of itself. Marny says that her gender is always assumed, so no one bothers to ask, but that she's intrigued by the "information [she's] getting that the binary is harmful" and is therefore exploring more about her gender. While the exact nature of the information is never clarified, the use of the word "binary" and the idea that gender fluidity is healthy hints at concepts held by feminist and queer activists and scholars. As a more accepting, fluid approach to gender and sexuality become more mainstream, Marny's definition and understanding of her own gendered experiences shift, indicating that her perception is linked to her evolving knowledge of gender and queer theory. Additionally, like Katherine above, Marny's internal gender identity, the way she performs gender, and the gender people perceive her to have, are not identical to each other. Later in her quote, she says she's been excited to call herself a woman and identifies as "fairly feminine," but that she finds it limiting at

times. Marny also identified her sexuality in a similar manner to Anne and Katherine, mentioning both her internal identity (“I’m not straight”) and the type of relationship she is currently in (“I’ve been in a monogamous heterosexual relationship for 27 years”).

Ticia, Maud, and Sarah did not explore much about their gender, and all indicated that they are women. Jill’s response was similarly brief, although there was a moment where it appeared as though she wanted to say more. She said “I’m a woman. Whatever that means, I’m a woman,” adding “and I identify as a woman!” Jill was the only person who seemed to want to comment more on my question about gender and sexuality but held herself back. I’ve included our exchange below:

Cool! Lovely, thank you. Um...

[noise on phone from Jill]

Oh, do you have more? Do you want to say anything else?

No, I was just gonna say I—I think that this... [long pause] Never mind, you’re recording so I won’t say it.

[laughter from both of us]

Okay, I mean it’s up to you! It’s up to you for sure!

It’s all good.

The moment felt serious, despite our laughter. Jill’s tone indicated that she seemed to have some definite thoughts about the topic, and it would have been interesting to

explore it further. Perhaps if we had a preexisting relationship like I had with everyone else she might have felt more comfortable sharing.

The above quotes illustrate a complex relationship between gender identity, gender expression, and how someone is gendered. The concepts are steeped in politics and perceptions of the self, tying it intricately to ideas about what is innate and inevitable, what structures of society are to be questioned, how one experiences our social world, and how people may choose to react accordingly. This framework helps outline the different aspects of gender and identity at play for individuals which is critical when exploring women's vernacular religious parking practices. The fear of parking and the use of cars as illustrated by the women in this research is predominantly driven by the experience of being treated as a cis-woman and the associated normative gender roles that go with that. The various vernacular parking practices, however, stem from a pool of ideas, ideologies, and perspectives on life ranging from feminist and queer approaches, heteronormative gender norms, feminine-centered spirituality, new age and Neo-Pagan spirituality, and Catholic and Christian roots. Thus, Asphalta is both queer and normative, new-age and Catholic, protector against assault and aider in speedy parking. She is liminal, morphing, and changing to reflect those who call on her. Others may use more abstract practices, such as hexing for parking, manifesting parking, or invoking the names and images of other saints, actresses, or other powerful women, but the practices are all intertwined.

Gender identity and gender performance are related but distinct experiences. While they are conventionally academic ideas, they have made it into public discourse and

therefore into the frameworks for how some of the women in this work view themselves. For others, like Ticia and Jill, the line between identity and performance is not so distinct in their personal views.

Most of the women in this study indicated a distinct anxiety about the safety around driving and parking, making it clear that their gender plays a large role in the way they perceive, and by extension, navigate parking spaces. In these moments, how the people identify their gender internally takes a back seat to the fact that they are perceived to be women and therefore must deal with the societal threats aimed at women who are alone in cars and parking lots. Whether or not participants directly stated *Asphalta* or related practices were protective, they linked their practices narratively to gendered safety concerns when they ask for help to find a good parking space. Participants' performances of gender and gender identities shape their experience of themselves and the world around them, thereby leading to complicated and nuanced feelings of self in regard to cars, religion, and mobilities. Understanding how gender as a personal identity, performance, and political lens interplay in these women's experiences of self and life allows for the deeper exploration of gender as understood, used, and experienced in vernacular religious parking practices.

The Liminality of Cars

To discuss the vulnerability present in the liminality of cars, the liminality of cars itself needs to be established. Cars can be thought of as performing two functions: cars as means (a form of transportation) and cars as places (predominantly stationary locations)

(Sanger 1995). For the sake of this thesis, place is defined as being comprised of location, locale, and a sense of place (Cresswell 2015). Cars traverse the liminal space between locations, and they serve as liminal spaces themselves. They are increasingly separate from their environment and are frequently being designed as interiors to be lived in separate from the spaces they move through (Jain 2005, 189). They serve as offices, living rooms, bedrooms, and more, all while offering escape, commute, mobility, and freedom.

While the liminality of cars could be examined from multiple perspectives, this research is primarily focused on the liminality of cars as relates to the act of parking, because the vernacular religious parking practices mentioned in this thesis are only used during the act of parking. While others have studied the liminality of commuting (see McAlpine and Piszczek 2023; Wilhoit 2017; Jachimowicz et al. 2021), literature on the liminality of parking is sparse. Commuting to and from work is argued to serve as a liminal space, giving people a regular opportunity to transition between their roles in the work domain and the home domain (McAlpine and Piszczek 2023; Wilhoit 2017; Jachimowicz et al. 2021). This brings up the important point that people have different and various roles that correspond to whatever sphere or domain they are in, be that private/public or work/home. Thus, transitioning between the private and public sphere while parking is more than moving physically from one location to another. It also encompasses a role shift.

The argument for parking as a liminal activity stems from Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's works on liminal rites (Gennep 1960, 10-12; Turner 1967, 93-96). These rites are marked by a period of transition and liminality between "states" where "the

state of the ritual subject [...] is ambiguous” (Turner 1967, 94). In other words, they are “betwixt and between” states and occupy a liminal and ambiguous zone (Turner 1967, 93–96). Based on this, parking can be viewed as being “betwixt and between” states of being. When considering cars as places, they “become subject to the logic of places and the familiar paradoxes of the public-private distinction” (Sanger 1995, 730). In other words, it becomes possible to view personal cars (as opposed to taxis or ride shares) as bubbles of private and personal space that traverse through larger, shared public spaces. Interestingly, participants only spoke about parking in relation to public areas, never personal private locations (such as a driveway or garage belonging to themselves or someone they know). They framed their cars as the private spaces within their narratives and area outside of their cars (such as streets, parking garages, parking lots, etc.) as public space. If we observe the transition of moving from private space to public space through the lens of a rite of passage, then parking becomes a liminal stage between being inside the private space of a car and being in a public shared space once you have exited the car.

Gendered Vulnerability

The liminality of cars and parking creates a sense of gendered vulnerability. Both the liminality of the car as transportation and the liminality of the car as place create social vulnerabilities for people perceived as women. Women as drivers of cars challenge traditional cultural boundaries that demand they stay at home, leading to a cultural backlash that employs the threat of rape, assault, and murder to frighten women into cultural compliance. Alternatively, ideals of domesticity are applied to the car itself,

transforming it into a living room on wheels or tool for domestic labor, thereby relegating the car (and the woman driving it) back to the private sphere once more.

Diane Tye's article "On Their Own: Contemporary Legends of Women Alone in Urban Spaces" takes up the conversation about how women navigate non-places and challenge ideas of men's domination of public spaces (Tye 2005).

The car has brought new concepts and language to the realms of production, revolutionized patterns of work, leisure and residence, and generated a plethora of changing signs and symbols in all areas of life from the sidewalk to the cinema (Thoms et al. 1998:1). Contemporary legends that place women in cars not only express our love/hate relationship with the automobile (see Lockwood 1998), they challenge the presence of women in what has been a male space of technology and consumption. A "potent symbol of masculinity" (Thoms et al. 1998: 1), the automobile has been less closely linked to female identity. In popular culture, for example, women have been more often associated with the back seat than the front with connotations of women and sex in cars rather than of women as powerful car drivers/owners. Legends that identify the car as a dangerous location for women effectively exert restraint over them, attempting to regulate both female sexuality, as is the case in many contemporary legends, and women's mobility. These legends censure women's autonomy as sole drivers of the car, challenging their efforts to take control significantly. Narratives of women victimized in their cars may be particularly powerful precisely because they speak to an area where some women fear taking control: driving (Tye 2005, 223-24).

The idea of women having a pervasive cultural fear of cars and driving (and by extension parking) is supported by a variety of works such as those written by Sarah Jain (2005), Carol Sanger (1995), and Margaret Walsh (2008). Traditionally, one of the ways society has contained women to the private sphere has been via the threat of rape, especially at night (Tye 2005, 1415; Malti-Douglas 2007, 1415). However, using nonconsensual sex as a threat to control women's mobility is not the only link between

women, sex, and cars. Sexual associations with cars are pervasive at every level of car culture, but advertisements are a particularly large influence. To quote Roland Barthes on the new Citroën:

In the exhibition halls, the sample cars are visited with an intense, affectionate care: this is the great tactile phase of discovery, the moment when the visual marvelous will submit to the reasoned assault of touching (for touch is the most demystifying of all the senses, unlike sight, which is the most magical): sheet metal stroked, upholstery punched, seats tested, doors caressed, cushions fondled; behind the steering wheel driving is mimed with the whole body. Here the object is totally prostituted, appropriated: upon leaving Metropolis heaven, the Déesse is mediatized in 15 minutes, accomplishing in this exorcism the entire dumb show of petit bourgeois annexation (Leak and Barthes 1994).

While Barthes paints the car as a sexual object that can be experienced by a person, Subaru opted to market their cars to white lesbians based on their sexuality and associated lifestyles (Mayyasi and Priceconomics 2016). In the article “How Subaru Came to Be Seen as Cars for Lesbians,” Mayyasi writes “People joke about lesbians’ affinity for Subaru, but what’s often forgotten is that Subaru actively decided to cultivate its image as a car for lesbians” (Mayyasi and Priceconomics 2016). In the 1990s, Subaru “went searching for people willing to pay a premium for all-wheel drive” and discovered five core groups of people who “were responsible for half of the company’s American sales: teachers and educators, health-care professionals, IT professionals, and outdoorsy types” (Mayyasi and Priceconomics 2016). The fifth group was lesbians.

‘When we did the research, we found pockets of the country like Northampton, Massachusetts, and Portland, Oregon, where the head of the household would be a single person—and often a woman,’ says Tim Bennett, who was the company’s director of advertising at the time. When

marketers talked to these customers, they realized these women buying Subarus were lesbian (Mayyasi and Priceconomics 2016).

In World War Two, women drivers of ambulances had their sexuality questioned as a result of their independence driving cars (Jain 2005, 195–96). Women driving cars for reasons other than parenting are often perceived by society as threatening, and while Subaru chose to market to independent women who were predominantly lesbians, many cultural responses are not as positive (Sanger 1995; Tye 2005; Jain 2005).

In popular culture, women are associated with sex in the back seat of cars rather than being thought of as drivers or owners of the cars in their own right (Tye 2005, 224). Many of the depictions of women participating in sexual activities are based around various rites of passage traditional in American car culture, such as making out, cruising, borrowing keys, etc. (Sanger 1995, 710). Jokes such as “a car is a bedroom on wheels” or men who drive loud, big cars “must be compensating” for their small penises or other perceived sexual incompetencies are also frequently encountered. Cars became a place that could not be fully accounted for or understood, thereby becoming the “locus of new versions of courting” (Jain 2005, 196).

While cars serve as a place of courtship or sex when consent is given, they are a place of violence and sexual assault when it is not (Sanger 1995, 711). Urban legends that depict the car as dangerous for women are attempting to regulate women’s mobility and sexuality, effectively imposing a restraint on their behavior (Tye 2005, 224). Sanger elaborates on this concept, saying:

[...] the car is also place of freedom and a zone of danger. For many women who regularly commute or deliver others, the car is a refuge, a place of personal privacy to think, read, or scribble notes while parked. But for many, reading is not the activity that first comes to mind when thinking about women in cars. Much more energy and attention has been devoted to the possibility of sex in cars. This is where the car emerges as a place of danger (Sanger 1995, 730).

By entering into a conversation about the sexual politics of cars, we as researchers are engaging queerly with a culture afraid of talking about sex (Warner 1999). The relationship between cars, parking, sex, sexual violence, gendered mobilities, and gendered vulnerability is inherently tied together. If one is to explore how the threat of rape impacts women's ability of navigate parking and car use, then one must discuss the relationship between sexuality and automobiles in American culture.

Masculinity and Modernity

While women's primary experience of vulnerability in a car is the threat of sexual assault, a common theme in participant's interviews was a more pervasive fear of patriarchal oppression. This, in turn, invites engagement with women's impressions of masculinity as tied to oppression and violent potential. Marny specifically linked ideas around masculinity, modernity, and patriarchy together when expressing herself:

I think of cities, cityscapes, cars, driving as like kind of masculine things, as kind of like these things that I need to find beauty and power within or else it'll just make me sad. You know. [laughter] That it'll just make me angry and sad. And so, you know, interacting with—like picturing how fast the cityscape can just be eaten up by the trees and the earth is comforting to me. That gives me joy. And thinking of this goddess that's actually sort of like watching over things—or not exactly watching over things but sort of calling the shots maybe or... interacting. I don't know if those are the ways

that I mean to put it, but anyway, that she's existing and that she's interacting with us. Yeah. But that I find that comforting as well.

Here Marny connects cities, cityscapes, cars, and driving with the masculine. To balance this out, Marny invokes images of trees and earth eating up the cityscape as well as saying that the goddess "reminds me of the impermanence and the insignificance of that patriarchy that it's like I was here waaaaay before you were here and I'll be here waaaay after you're gone." Interestingly, this connects back to ideas often held by Neo-Pagans who "perceive modernity as a force that has alienated humans from a way of life that followed the rhythms of seasonal cycles and regularly brought them into contact with the divine in nature" and often chose to seek out nature and the sacredness within nature (Magliocco 2004, 4). Marny does exactly this, contrasting modernity with nature, while also linking masculinity to modernity and goddess (and by extension femininity) to nature, thus constructing the binary model of masculine-modernity and feminine-nature. While this is not a discussion on personal gender-based violence, it is a conversation about feelings of systemic, institutional gender-based oppression. This feeling is reflected in Marny's criteria for her parking spot. Below is an excerpt about what she looks for:

Um, sometimes I want to be far away. Sometimes I want to be close. Um, lately I haven't, you know, in Portland, it's not the same running into, running into like horrendous parking. Like it is in San Francisco or other places. Um, some places where I feel safe and like the cars held and, um, sort of like a, a little, a little holding spot.

Can you elaborate on what you mean when you say where the car is held?

Oh, um, I think just a spot where I feel, um, like the car itself is, is safe while I'm away. Um, I think some of these things I do really unconsciously. And so I haven't thought about what it is, but I'll definitely see parking

spots that, that don't feel right. Even if they're close or like out in the open or like, I don't know, anyone else might think is a good spot, but like sometimes just doesn't feel like it doesn't feel right. So someplace that feels intuitively, um, I guess safe, I guess, um, uneventful. Yeah, I like that word uneventful. Yeah.

Um, when you're thinking about safety for you and for your car, um, what are the things that you're trying to be safe from or sort of ensure that don't happen by parking in that particular space?

Well, recently, I've driven over two screws. Yeah. Like twice in the last two months or three months, which is kind of a lot, I think. And so a spot that doesn't have a lot of screws. Also, I have some—I have like a—I was attacked on the street a long time ago. And so, I sort of like look around for like, you know, some toxic masculinity and see if there is any, you know, it's usually kind of what it involves. And avoiding that, perhaps. And, yeah, I think that's about it.

Marny emphasizes an abstract feeling of safety and uneventfulness as what she looks for in a parking spot, but the poetics of her storytelling draw a parallel between the desire to protect her car from damage and the desire to protect herself from harm. First, when asked if she could share what she was trying to be safe “from,” Marny shares a quick, three-sentence micro-narrative about driving over screws as part of her answer — she opens with “Well, recently I've driven over two screws,” then moves on to the body of her narrative with the sentence “Like twice in the last two months or three months, which is kind of a lot, I think,” before wrapping her story up with a sort of “coda” saying “And so a spot that doesn't have a lot of screws.” By extension, she implies that a parking spot should be free of things that will harm her car.

Then, she goes on as if she is about to begin another micro-narrative that will mirror the above structure, saying “Also, I have some—” but instead she begins to trip over

her words, saying “Also, I have some—I have like a—I was attacked on the street a long time ago.” Here, Marny starts her story twice before almost blurting out “I was attacked on the street a long time ago.” Instead of a smooth micro-narrative, she has a halting, nervous tone to her sentences and never fully tells a story. While she does not detail the attack, nor does she describe her attacker, she does link the “body” of her narrative (“I was attacked on the street”) to her conclusion about looking around for and avoiding “toxic masculinity.” She has attempted to mirror the structure of her first micronarrative about screws, but instead delivers a more abrupt and less detailed narrative, albeit with the semblance of the first narrative (an attempt at the introduction “Also, I have some—,” a short body “I was attacked on the street a long time ago,” and a coda stating that she avoids toxic masculinity). In this way, Marny’s experience on the street is linked structurally in her narrative to toxic masculinity. Both of the “lessons” or “takeaways” from Marny’s micronarratives – look out for screws and avoid toxic masculinity – are positioned structurally as her response to what her safety concerns are.

While Marny was the most articulate about the relationship she saw between cars, cityscape, modernity, toxic masculinity, and the patriarchy, many of the other women constructed their narratives in opposition to toxic masculinity or men in general. The implied danger lurking in the shadows was sexual assault as committed by men specifically. Conversely, the ideas they found to be empowering and safe revolved around notions of femininity, spirituality, and nature. Looking at the various narratives in this chapter, it

becomes apparent that the vulnerability women experience in the liminal situation of parking stems from the patriarchal threat of gender-based oppression.

Gender Identity and Terminology

Throughout this thesis, participants are referred to as women. This term was chosen to reflect how participants discuss themselves. While many indicated queer or non-binary identities when asked directly, all participants indicated an affiliation with the social experience of being a woman. However, all gender identity and experience are nuanced as reflected in the examples above. For the sake of this research, the term women refers to anyone who chooses to identify as such, including trans women and non-binary women.

The discussion of feminism, gender identity, and queerness in this chapter is necessary for two reasons. First, depicting queerness where it exists helps counter the historic erasure of queer identities in academic research. There is also a distinct overlap between Neo-Paganism, new age spirituality, and queer communities. Many of the participants hold some form of a queer identity while also participating in Neo-Pagan or new age spirituality, thus showing that the community (and the practice) depicted in this thesis are part of a larger subgroup. Second, prefacing this thesis with a discussion of the nuance of women's gender identities lays the groundwork for the use of the term in upcoming chapters. Participants are referred to as women to allow for comparisons to be drawn between their experiences for the sake of the research. However, each person's experience of their gender identity is complex and nuanced. While this chapter has explored the complexities of gender and how it impacts the use and perception of cars, the

following chapter goes into more detail regarding the impact of gendered vulnerability on women's feelings of safety.

Chapter 3: Using Cars as Havens from Gendered Vulnerability

While the previous chapter established the theoretical framework for understanding the gendered vulnerability due to the liminal nature of cars, this chapter explores how the women in this study conceptualize issues of safety for themselves and others as created by this vulnerability. This chapter shows that the women in this study experience stress, anxiety, and fear stemming from the liminal act of parking and discusses how women navigate the complexities of keeping themselves and their children safe when parking with young kids. In these situations, the mother must balance her needs with the needs of her children while simultaneously coping with the liminal environment. Lastly, the car is viewed as a temporary haven used by participants to provide refuge from the vulnerability and stress of the liminal state they find themselves in. In this case, the participants are primarily trapped between locations with time to spare before they can safely transition to their next destination. The car becomes a temporary refuge while they wait for time to pass.

Feeling Vulnerable

While there was a consensus among the women in this study that parking spots needed to be safe and close to their destination, the idea of a “good” parking spot was frequently defined by what it did *not* have. For example, a good parking location was likely to *avoid* big trucks, beat up cars, isolated areas, unlit areas, littered ground, unknown men, mentally ill people, etc. Apart from being near one’s destination (and in one instance, harboring a nice view out of the car window), the criteria for a good parking spot were

primarily determined on the basis of avoidance. Examining the items meant to be avoided, coupled with the women's comments about needing to be "safe" when parking, leads to the conclusion that a "good" parking spot is one that mitigates the sense of gendered vulnerability as much as possible.

For example, Sarah said, "If I am in a parking garage and there's a light out right next to the parking space that I have, I would be hesitant to park there." She also mentions she checks to see if the cars near her are "run down [or] aren't very clean—like if it looks like it hasn't been washed or there's a lot of scratches on the car." Additionally, Sarah worries whether parking next to trucks is alright, saying that she drove her dad's truck in high school and that her dad "is the most considerate person there is, so I know that not everyone who drives a truck is like that. But my thoughts are 'What if it is that one [person] that, you know, was kind of conservative?'" Sarah's sense of vulnerability when parking is multifaceted. She feels threatened by the pervasive culture of individualized violence around driving (Jain 2005, 186), worried about her personal safety, and anxious about the security of her car and belongings when she is not present. While she is nervous about being attacked by men, her anxieties speak to a much larger sense of vulnerability generated by the liminal situation of parking.

Anne also identified a pervasive sense of vulnerability when it comes to parking, saying:

As women in the city, parking far from your house can be scary. Like, if you don't get a parking place close to your house, that means you—and it's

nighttime and you have to walk to your apartment, it's a total—I mean, one, it's like a drag, right? Especially if you have groceries. But two, it can be sort of the security thing. So I sort of think of it that way, like, “please help me get a parking space close.” And so I think of it as, as, you know, both—mostly you're just like irritated and you're like, “oh, I don't want to walk this far” and also, you don't want your car to get stolen and the next time you have to get in your car, you don't want to have to walk far. But—and you don't want to get a ticket. But I think of it as like, you know, that whole thing of women have to, we have to be really aware of where we are and where we're walking.

Like Sarah, Anne's fears are multifold. When I asked Anne to tell me about what she is doing when she invokes Our Lady of Asphalta³, she immediately began talking about Chicago and how frightening parking can be. While the issues Anne brings up may seem purely logistical problems, walking home in the dark or being burdened by groceries adds to the level of vulnerability present when parking. The dark makes it harder to identify a potential attacker while the groceries make it harder to flee or flight if necessary. Additionally, being encumbered by valuable items while in a poorly lit area makes one a better target for theft or mugging. Anne's safety concerns extend to her car itself as well. She mentions being worried about getting a ticket or having her car stolen due to parking in a poor location. Again, like Sarah, Anne's combined fears paint a picture of anxiety due to the vulnerable situation of parking.

While many women expressed vulnerability when parking, Katherine and Ticia highlighted more explicit concerns around personal safety. Katherine said that she waited

³ This is Anne's name for the parking goddess.

tables for a long time and that she would get out of work at night, so parking near her work was ideal as it was “just sort of sensible basic women’s safety stuff.” While she’s never had any problems, she said she is sometimes “more fearful than other times,” but she does not know what it is connected to. However, Katherine mentioned that she checks the back seat when she gets in her car. This action is very familiar to those who know the popular urban legend “Killer in the Backseat” (Mikkelson 2000).⁴ In the legend, a woman is tipped off by a helpful stranger that there is a man lurking in her backseat, ready to sexually assault and murder her. The story is meant to impress upon women the importance of being aware of their surroundings when getting in and out of cars alone. Katherine’s habit of checking her back seat indicates that she is aware of the threat of violence present to her as a woman alone in the dark.

Ticia also mentioned that she was afraid of walking to her car alone at night, especially if she parked far away.

Why wouldn’t you want to walk alone to your car at night?

Because we were in Long Beach and that was during the “90s and it was not very safe. And the campus did not have security. We didn’t have emergency call boxes until my last year there and so everyone walked with their key out between their fingers. I don’t think half of us had [pepper sprays] or any kind of self-defense. And there had been reports that women had been assaulted going to their cars. And so it was a safety issue.

⁴ This is a common urban legend that Tye also explored in her article. It’s the story of “a woman who is warned by a garage station attendant or motorist traveling behind her that unbeknownst to her there is a serial killer crouched in her back seat waiting to attack” (Tye 2005, 223).

In the above quote, Ticia is focused on her personal safety concerns. She expresses anxiety and fear over the fact that she was not given a way to defend herself or call for help if she were to be attacked. Combined with the reports of women being assaulted on the way to their cars, Ticia's story depicts her experience of vulnerability as a woman alone when parking.

For women alone, experiences of vulnerability when parking are complex. Their primary concern is their safety, followed by issues of convenience and protection of personal property. Although this thesis attempts to separate these concerns on paper for the sake of analysis, the reality of the experience is less straightforward. Feeling safe is dependent on mitigating as many levels of vulnerability as possible. Therefore a "good" parking spot is one that assuages issues of cleanliness, visibility, proximity, accessibility, and threatening social encounters.

Juggling Parking Vulnerability as a Parent

While the above section explored how women experience vulnerability when parking alone, many participants brought up stories around parking with their children in the car. In fact, most women in this study were mothers, many of whom shared numerous anecdotes or comments about parking with their children. Navigating the vulnerability created by the liminal situation of parking presents a very different problem than dealing with vulnerability alone. Parents deal with complicated situations, such as wrangling children in and out of cars, dropping off or picking up their kids, and waiting in the car until their children have finished their activity. In these scenarios, one needs to be

cognizant of their own safety and the safety of their children. Issues of proximity, accessibility, and visibility are more important if one is strapping kids in and out of car seats, while avoiding threatening social situations becomes critical if one must keep the car doors unlocked and open for an extended period. Ticia expressed the difference between being vulnerable alone or vulnerable with kids, saying:

It's just so... Being alone felt actually more vulnerable than having my three kids with me in a different way. Being alone [and] vulnerable felt more like a personal attack and with the kids it felt much more like that that threat left my mind personally. It's more about them [unintelligible] the car. And so you're not as focused on yourself. You're trying to corral and get everybody safely to the car if you had any hairs on the back of your neck raise or... They didn't have any sense of danger, so they were, you know, wanting to not hold my hand or like run around and stuff and trying to just get three—I had two hands and three kids. So to take them back safely back to the car, the logistics were a little difficult.

Coping with the liminal situation of parenting and parking simultaneously came up most frequently for Maud and Ticia. Both mothers homeschooled their children from young ages and were responsible for much of the driving that came with that. Ticia expressed significantly more stress about this than Maud did, frequently remarking on how her vernacular religious parking practices helped her cope. Maud, however, does not use a vernacular religious parking practice at all, despite sharing multiple examples of the parking goddess in use.

While parents of all genders can be responsible for driving kids around to extra-curricular activities, Maud and Ticia, like many women, do the majority of the chauffeuring and waiting in cars. In fact, “for many women cars have served less as an

escape from domestic studies than as a technologically enhanced form of domestic obligation” (Sanger 1995, 709). In many ways, Ticia is the “mother-chauffeur” described by Sanger. “To the extent that suburban life required both wheels and drivers, it also required a force of unemployed mothers with the time to devote themselves to running a proper household” (Sanger 1995, 719). Ticia was responsible for both driving her children around and running household errands.

Driving provided evidence of good parenting and mileage the measure of maternal contribution to familial welfare. As the cult of the talented child began to emerge, even more driving time was required to transport children to the sources of their enrichment: piano lessons, Little League, and so on. Advertising for family cars emphasized mother friendly features: power-assisted brakes and steering, automatic transmissions, driver-controlled door locks, built-in child safety seats, and spacious trunks to facilitate the loading of grocery bags (Sanger 1995, 719).

While homeschooling and unschooling⁵ often require more labor from parents to piece together enough extracurricular and educational activities to sustain their child’s interests and learning goals, Ticia was known to drive farther and more frequently than other parents to provide her kids with these opportunities. Since her family lived “in a forest” in Washington rather than a city, Ticia would frequently drive an hour or more into Vancouver, Washington and Portland, Oregon to give her three kids access to fun and engaging classes and activities. When her kids were too young to stay home alone while

⁵ Homeschooling is an umbrella term for many different approaches to education outside of traditional education. Unschooling is a method of homeschooling. Because homeschooling is often filled with trial and error, families may attempt unschooling as one of multiple methods of homeschooling to find what best suits their child’s and family’s needs. Ticia’s family predominantly unschooled their children but used other homeschooling methods as well.

their dad was out working, Ticia would need to take all three kids with her no matter where she went. This resulted in her frequently needing to entertain two small children while the third was taking a class, or else required her to wait for extended periods as it was impractical to return the long distance home. Ticia shared her experiences, saying:

Well, 'cause I'm usually waiting. Yeah, so when the kids were little, like, C was much older than R and S, so when she was taking classes out at like, um... Everywhere we would commute like an hour, right, to get to anything that was fun from where we lived. So, I had the van at the time and we would take her all the way to those OCAC⁶—the craft college—and she had like three hours worth of classes, so I would—I had a blanket in the back of the van and I had pillows and sleeping bags. And so, I'd bring all my knitting and I have S and R back there and they have books and their toys and everything to play with. And on, like, rainy days and stuff when they didn't want to be outside, we would sit in the van and just wait for her to come out and do all our activities in the back of the van. Those are actually good memories 'cause that was really fun.

And then now, some of my driving would be silly to drive. I have the little Bolt⁷—the electric car—now and it's so small, so there's no, like, stretching out, hanging out in the back of that. But Beaverton is like an hour, hour and a half on terrible traffic days to get to from where we live. And so sometimes Satori will only have like a two hour class and so I, you know, drive over there and I often—sometimes I'll just sit in the car and take care of, you know, emails and stuff like that and bills all that and sometimes... I sit in the car and wait a LOT, Avery. [laughter] A lot. And it's not—it's not like if I was all by myself and I wasn't waiting on anybody I would not be doing that. Probably because I do it so much out of necessity. But if it's just me, I would not just, like, go somewhere and sit in the car.

In her narrative above, Ticia does not directly identify that because she is a woman, she drove her kids around in a van sporting many of the features advertised to moms (power steering, child safety, etc.), and yet the link between her gender role and her car use

⁶ Oregon College of Arts and Crafts

⁷ Chevrolet Bolt

is clear. If she were not a mother responsible for ensuring the safety of her children, she would not choose to sit in her parked car. While her children are in classes, Ticia is stuck in the liminal space between dropping her child off and picking her up so that they may return home. Ticia's experience of waiting in the car at night while her youngest daughter is at her dance class helps illustrate what choosing to sit in the liminal space can be like:

So, last night she had her two-hour classes. And behind the studio it's very dark, but there's like all these restaurants, so there's constantly people walking past and everything. And so I had to concentrate on some things that I was trying to fill out all these forms yesterday and it was like between 8 and 10 p.m. (is when I was in the car). And so I chose to go over to the bank across the street which was a very actually deserted parking lot, but it was quiet and there were no distractions. And so I was kind of weighing my options of well, it's not like it's the safest place to park but it's less distractions. I like lock my doors and I have, you know, my phone and everything. And so I chose to go to the empty parking lot versus the one that was by all of the restaurants.

Interesting

But if I had been later, I wouldn't have made that choice. I would have gone to a better lit parking lot and all that stuff.

Ticia's choice to sit and wait in her car effectively keeps her inside the liminal zone since she never transitions fully out of parking and into a new activity in the public or private sphere. Her role as the mother-chauffeur is the reason she is in this position in the first place. She's on parenting duty but is allowed a temporary break from actively parenting while her daughter is in dance class. She fills this break with emails, working on the go instead of answering her emails in a dedicated workspace. However, Ticia does not feel entirely safe. She is aware of the danger presented by being a woman alone in a car in a dark, empty parking lot. Staying inside her car offers a sense of safety, but also opens the

opportunity for anxieties related to sexual assault within cars. By prolonging the length of time she is “betwixt and between” the public and private spheres, Ticia’s sense of vulnerability increases. However, she deems this as necessary to make sure that she will be able to pick up her daughter from her dance class the moment it ends, thereby ensuring her daughter experiences the least amount of vulnerability possible in her transition from her dance class to the car. Coping with the vulnerability of parking for more than one person becomes a balancing act between the needs of the parent and the needs of the child.

Like Ticia, Maud chooses to spend time in her parked car as well. When her children were younger, Maud waited in her car for her kids to finish their homeschool classes and their extracurricular activities, placing her in a similar liminal space as Ticia where she was partially engaged with the task of parenting and whatever additional task she chose to do while in the car. However, now that her children are grown, Maud still spends time in her parked car when on her lunch break at work. When Maud sits in the car to have her lunch break instead of eating in the lunchroom, she hasn’t truly left work nor is she at home or at a restaurant in a place dedicated to mealtime. She resides in a liminal zone of temporary personal time and space where she has shifted most of the way out of her work role, but not yet transitioned into a different role instead. Interestingly, this liminality does not seem to cause Maud any stress or anxiety. Perhaps this is because she is experiencing a type of liminality similar to that of commuters wherein she is essentially on a break between various domains and roles as opposed to Ticia who is multitasking and

coexisting between roles. As mentioned before, Maud does not use the vernacular religious parking practices that she shared with me. So, despite knowing of different vernacular religious parking practices that could be used to cope with the stress of the liminality of parking, Maud has no need or desire to do this. Ticia, however, does.

Cars as Temporary Havens

When one is stuck in the liminal space of parking and faced with the vulnerability of the situation, many people turn their cars into temporary havens to cope with the stress. The focus rests here on “sense of place” and how “placemaking” can be achieved through the addition of meaning to a space (i.e., somewhere lacking meaning). Cresswell gives the example of a dorm room to illustrate this idea (Cresswell 2015, 24-26) – when it is empty, it is a space, but rearrange the furniture, fill it with photos, dirty laundry, and a few books, and it becomes a place. Through acts of placemaking, cars are temporarily transformed from liminal spaces into more concrete locations, thereby offering a refuge from the overwhelming liminality.

Like Ticia, Maud also goes into detail about the role her car plays in her parenting, detailing how she learned to use her waiting time in the car:

Um I think... Yeah, I've always—I always have done that at this job and I think that when J was homeschooling at Village⁸ on the West side, there was a lot of wait time in the car because he would go into just one class or

⁸ “Village” in this narrative refers to Village Home, an educational and community resource for homeschoolers that provides grade-free classes for kids, as well as access to other activities and extracurriculars such as theater and official high school competitive teams such as mock trial, model United Nations, and others⁸ (“Home - Village Home - Classes & Community for Homeschooling Families in Beaverton, Portland, & Salem” n.d.).

something, or maybe two classes. So I think that was when it first ever occurred to me that I would spend time in the car and maybe want to have a nice space and bring along books or sketchbook or whatever and you know do things.

Just as Ticia drove more due to homeschooling her kids, so did Maud. Again, this is an example of Maud performing a gendered parenting role as the mother-chauffeur, in part necessitated by the higher degree of involvement with a child's education that homeschooling demands of parents. While Village does have campuses, most children only take a few classes a day and often have breaks in-between. For safety reasons, Village (at the time) did not allow kids to be unattended on campus between classes. Coupled with the fact that many children would only be in class for two or three hours during the day, it was not feasible for many parents who drove from far away to drop their kids off, return home, and then pick the kids up later. Caregivers like Maud who had to drive for over a half hour to get to Village often opted to stay near the campus and wait for their children instead.

In her comment above, Maud stated that she learned to use her time in her car as a byproduct of spending time waiting for her child to get out of classes. She emphasizes the importance of turning it into a "nice space" via acts of placemaking, such as bringing along "books or sketchbook or whatever." Maud then elaborated on how this practice developed over the years as her children grew up and she got a job:

Yeah, I listen to things, I have music, I have podcasts, I enjoy conversations with kids. I don't know if you recall that—do you feel that your parents used car time in that way? I think it's a pretty widely recognized phenomenon these days that a lot of difficult conversations with our kids are maybe easier to have in the car because you're both looking forwards so there's less

intense eye contact. So I think that there's a lot of conversations that there's just a little level of ease that comes up, so I have that sort of dynamic with my kids in the car and umm... and the car can be a little bit like a little office. Like at work, I often take my break—my lunch break—in the car because I can read a book, I can listen to music, I can do whatever instead of being in the lunchroom with all the other people. It's like a little bit of a—can be a refuge.

Here Maud expands on how she uses placemaking to turn her car into a temporary haven. Maud utilizes the car's prospect of liminality to transition into a temporary space outside of her working life in the public sphere, but not fully home back in the private sphere. She does her best to mitigate the vulnerability present when parking and then to transform the parked car's liminal properties into something advantageous. Finding a safe but beautiful parking spot creates a temporary respite that is only possible due to the car's ability to shift from point to point quickly. While her coworkers are effectively trapped having lunch in their office because they lack liminality, Maud employs the liminality of her car to have a better lunch experience than her coworkers. Similarly, Maud shows how she uses the car's liminality to her benefit when parenting her children. The temporary nature of the drive means there is a finite end to the uncomfortable conversation and an easy way to transition into the next activity. The vulnerable nature of the car ride allows for vulnerable conversations to take place. Instead of being afraid of the vulnerability of liminality, Maud takes the opportunity to break down communication barriers when parenting.

Like Maud, Ticia uses placemaking to create a temporary haven for herself and her children as a means of coping with the gendered vulnerability of parking. Returning to Ticia's earlier quote, she states:

I had a blanket in the back of the van and I had pillows and sleeping bags. And so, I'd bring all my knitting and I have S and R back there and they have books and their toys and everything to play with. And on, like, rainy days and stuff when they didn't want to be outside, we would sit in the van and just wait for her to come out and do all our activities in the back of the van. Those are actually good memories 'cause that was really fun.

Ticia's addition of bedding, toys, and craft supplies is an act of placemaking as she is adding meaning to a space meant for transportation and transforming it into a place for family, play, and creativity. The van, primarily a means of transportation, has now become a temporary living room. Indeed, the concept of a car as a living room has even been an intentional design feature of some cars. In the 1940s and '50s there was a rise of suburbanization with the car becoming "a sort of second living room, featuring fabrics and upholstery that followed trends in home design" (Jain 2005, 196). Using the car as a living room provides a temporary haven for Ticia and her two children while the third child is in class. Without this haven, Ticia and her kids would be stuck experiencing the discomfort and vulnerability of the liminal parking situation they are in. By creating a temporary haven, Ticia mitigates much of the sense of vulnerability that comes with waiting in a parked car. Once the older child is done with her class, the temporary haven no longer serves a purpose and is disassembled, allowing the whole family to begin the transition home.

However, Ticia mentions that since trading out the van for smaller electric car there is no longer room for the car to transform into a place for family (i.e., a living room). Ticia also no longer mentions needing to provide a place for the younger children to wait. Instead of the temporary haven taking the shape of a living room, it now resembles an office. In this case, placemaking occurs not by altering the physical environment inside the car (such as with the addition of blankets earlier), but by changing the activities done inside the car. By using the car for administrative tasks such as emails instead of driving, the car is defined by its new use (office work) and thus becomes viewed as an office. While sending emails is a less gendered activity to do in a car, the fact that Ticia is waiting in her car for her children reveals that she is still using her car as an office due to her role as mother-chauffeur. Ticia's younger children are no longer required to wait with her in the parked car, but that does not mean that she has yet been relieved of waiting duty. Now that she must cope with the liminal parking situation alone, she turns her car into a temporary haven more suited to her needs as an individual, such as an office.

Ticia's (mis)use of her car to better fulfil her heteronormative role as a mother-chauffeur opens a complicated dialogue between heteronormativity and queerness. She is being asked to drive extensively while still providing childcare to all three children in a safe, nurturing, and heteronormative environment. While other families might choose to utilize a form of paid childcare to watch two of the kids while the third is driven around, this is not the path Ticia and her family chose (though they may not have had the option given their remote location or financial situation). To successfully perform her role as the

mother-chauffeur and take care of three young children at the same time, she engages in the non-normative action of transforming her van into a living room. This way, she is providing safety, care, and enrichment for three homeschooled children at once. Two are being taken care of in the car while one attends classes outside of the car. This shows that the boundary between heteronormativity and queerness are, in real life, much blurrier than in academic theory. Lived gender experiences contain both normative and transgressive actions and cannot be boiled down to being solely one or the other. Queer theory rejects the concept of the binary. The normative and the transgressive cannot be truly isolated from one another as they are defined in conjunction with each other.

Thus, while pursuing heteronormative ideals for her children, Ticia queered her own transportation-related experiences. With regards to queer theory, Michael Warner states “For both academics and activists, queer gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual” (Warner 1993, xxvi). Additionally, if the normative use of cars is as a means of transportation, then the queer use of cars is as something other than transportation. This, combined with Judith Butler’s assertion of queerness as something that can be *done* (Butler 1993; 2004; 2006b), also allows for exploring the complex relationship between the normative and the transgressive use of cars.

This chapter explored the sense of vulnerability women have when parking, focusing in on safety concerns. It also discussed how participants use their cars as temporary havens to navigate the vulnerability of liminal space. The following chapter,

however, goes into specific detail on the role of vernacular religious parking practices in creating a safe environment. Using a car as a temporary haven is frequently preceded by calls to the protective parking figure of choice, with participants often crediting the safety of their cars and their parking locations to the aid of their vernacular religious practice.

Chapter 4: The Role of Vernacular Religious Parking Practices

The previous chapters established the spiritual leanings of most of the women in this study and discussed the impact of liminality and vulnerability on the women's parking habits. The women only ever invoke their vernacular religious parking practices during the process of parking and do so in order to obtain a "good" parking spot. Thus, this thesis argues that vernacular religious parking practices serve four key roles for the participants: relieving stress, protecting against violence, manifesting prosperity, and connecting to feminine spiritual lineage.

While the last chapter focused primarily on the way women experience vulnerability when parking, this chapter goes a step further in demonstrating how the vernacular religious parking practices combat this sense of vulnerability. Although participants may indicate that they navigate the gendered vulnerability of parking through actions such as using their cars as safe havens, being mindful of their surroundings, or otherwise strategically parking to ensure their safety, many of these actions are preceded with the invocation of their vernacular religious parking practice. The perceived success of any of the endeavors to ensure one's safety is frequently predicated on whether the vernacular religious parking practice was invoked. Participants rarely spoke about their practice failing, nor did they mention times when they found a "good" parking space without using their practice. Therefore, it can be inferred that any of the actions the women might strive to take to ensure they have a good and safe parking place rely on the prior success of invoking their vernacular religious parking practice. This chapter explores

in further detail the process of feeling vulnerable, using their vernacular religious parking practices, and a sense of successfully mitigating gendered vulnerability when parking.

Relieving Stress when Negotiating Liminal Space

Most participants acknowledged the presence of stress when parking. Navigating the vulnerability and uncertainty of the liminal situation, especially with children, often caused nervousness or anxiety. The longer or more challenging it is to find a parking space, the more these feelings intensify. Consequently, it was common for people to talk about using their vernacular religious parking practice as a means of self-soothing, calming others, providing a distraction, or adding levity. Sarah, for example, talks about how her family says the “Hail Agnes” rhyme when they are in the car together, saying:

I guess there is times that [my grandma] doesn't it say it and then I would say “Hail Agnes, full of Grace, help us find a parking space.” Usually when I'm in a car with my grandma (so is my dad and so is my sister). So my dad says it, too, because we kind of all were in the car in San Francisco. Like, we all were introduced to this thing, so. So, both him and my sister sometimes will chime in and just be like “Oh yeah! Remember that saying? Let's do it.”

When asked to describe the atmosphere in the car with her family when using the rhyme, Sarah continued, saying:

Silly. More silly. We're just like “Oh, let's ‘Hail’—it's a fun saying. ‘Hail Agnes, full of Grace, help us find a parking space.’” Where we're just kind of silly and “I'm on my way to a restaurant. I'm having fun.” Like, we're never in a car together and going to something serious. We're in a car together and, you know, on our way to have fun in some way. So, we're in a good mood and we're just wanting to get to our destination faster. So we're like “Let's go!” [*laughter*]

For Sarah, the vernacular religious parking practice can be a fun, playful activity that offers distraction and helps pass the time, all while bonding as a family. While her grandmother taught her this practice as a kid, the entertainment it provides in adulthood is still a valuable way of connecting with her family while passing the time during the stressful activity of parking. Jill and Ticia both also mentioned teaching their kids their parking practices, with Ticia sharing the following:

We'd say "Pray to the parking gods!" or "Cross your fingers and toes!" But it was always definitely like you thought you had some power in talking to them to get a good parking spot. Because growing up in Southern California especially, you might go to a concert, a game, somewhere where you'd have to walk a very long distance. And then later you'd have to walk that very long distance and find your car. We would always try to park the closest to any entrance spot. And in Southern California, it's so crowded in all the parking lots that sometimes you drive around and drive around and you're impatient, so we would say "Pray to the parking gods!" Well, I don't remember ever saying like goddess, but I always said like [...] like the other thing I always said was "Cross your fingers and toes to the parking gods that we find spot." [laughter] And part of that is like—especially I did it a lot when the kids were a little because I had to have three children I was bringing anywhere. And a close parking spot means a whole lot! (Of convenience.)

Ticia notes the impatience that she and her passengers would experience circling around looking for a parking spot. Performing the act of crossing your fingers and toes to the parking gods while saying the phrase out loud evidently provides entertainment and distraction from the stressful experience of being stuck in a liminal environment for both her and her children. It also offers hope to the passengers of the vehicle that the process of parking will conclude shortly and favorably. The uncertainty of *when* parking will end as well as *how* it will end adds to Ticia's worry. She makes it clear that she is concerned by the

prospect that she will have to “walk a very long distance,” expressing relief at the idea of successfully locating a parking spot near her destination.

In addition to Ticia’s comment about using her vernacular religious parking practice with her children, Jill shared a similar memory of using her practice with her kids, saying “we’d pull into a parking lot and I’d have these three little voices in the back seat going ‘DORIS DAY PARKING! DORIS DAY PARKING! DORIS DAY PARKING!’” She added “I don’t think the kids—I don’t think my triplets (who are now 25) have any idea who Doris Day is, but they still know what Doris Day parking looks like!” While Jill does not mention a sense of anxiety or stress when parking, she clearly treasures the memory of using “Doris Day parking” with her kids. Just as Sarah’s “Hail Agnes” practice brought her family together, Jill’s practice created an important connection between herself and her children. While they may not know who Doris Day is, they have kept the memories created in childhood of sharing the vernacular religious parking practices together.

Vernacular religious parking practices serve as a way for parents and older adults to help younger family members deal with the uncertainty and liminality present when parking, especially when parking takes a long time. Families try to balance the private needs inside their car of keeping children entertained, calm, and happy, while also considering the environment outside the car as they wait for an available parking space. This causes anxiety, stress, and impatience. As shown above, practices such as “Hail Agnes,” crossing one’s fingers and toes to the parking gods, and “Doris Day parking” serve as fun, family

bonding rituals to pass the time, entertain the kids, and make everyone feel involved while waiting for parking.

In addition to providing entertainment and levity, vernacular religious parking practices serve to mitigate the stress of uncertainty and vulnerability by shifting one's mindset towards participatory consciousness. Parking is a liminal act where drivers and passengers are “betwixt and between” states of being or private/public space. Vernacular religious parking practices serve to navigate this liminal period. Vernacular religious parking practices are therefore inherently liminal as they only exist during the liminal activity of parking and nowhere else.

Ng-Chan argues that “the commute is a unique and everyday liminal space, one that is ripe for artistic encounters and stories to materialize the city in transformative ways” (Ng-Chan 2016). The liminality of commuting is one of betweenness, shifting, neither one thing nor the other. It provides a space for transition between work and home domains (McAlpine and Piszczek 2023; Wilhoit 2017; Jachimowicz et al. 2021). The liminality of parking, however, is comprised of multiplicity and multitasking. While a commuter may be thinking about their role in work and home, they are not actually performing the roles while commuting. Conversely, the act of parking requires the driver to actively consider and engage with the world outside of their car, the dynamics within their car, and the car itself. While it is also a unique and everyday liminal space, the type of artistic encounters generated during parking are often focused on coping with the hectic nature of the activity.

The liminality of parking allows for imaginative, creative, and artistic encounters that closely resemble Neo-Pagan magic. Neo-Pagan magic refers to “a set of techniques for training the imagination by attuning to the elements, phases of the moon, cycle of the seasons, and emotional connections with inanimate objects” and that “like art, the goal of magic is to bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness—that allow participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world” (Magliocco 2012, 18). Art and magic are not so different, then. Therefore, *Asphalta* and related vernacular religious parking practices act as imaginative artistic magical practice that springs up during the liminal space of parking, thus positioning *Asphalta* and other parking deities as holders of liminality. Thus, when Ticia, for example, uses the Parking Gods during parking, she is doing so as a creative, artistic practice born from liminality to help her cope with the stress of being “betwixt and between.” Calling on the parking gods, then, can serve as a way of navigating the multiplicity of roles that are intersecting. Perhaps it is not a coincidence for Ticia that her vernacular religious parking practice is comprised of multiple deities, together forming the “parking gods.” The multiplicity of the “parking gods” reflects the many roles that she fills when parking.

Asphalta and other vernacular religious parking practices help to shift one’s mindset when parking from focusing on the stress and uncertainty of liminality to focusing on the magical opportunities inherent within liminality. Carving out time to engage in the ritual of parking can help provide clear boundaries for everyone in the car that you have entered the liminal space of parking intentionally and together, thus eliminating the

feeling of stress caused by searching for a parking spot. Suddenly the search for parking becomes a hunt for signs of magic or divine assistance. This training of the imagination can help “bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness” allowing “participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world” (Magliocco 2012, 18). Thus, instead of the act of parking becoming a stressful experience of liminality as uncertainty, it becomes an exciting experience of liminality as magic. Additionally, for those who intend to wait in their car and stay parked, *Asphalta* helps navigate the need to find a place where they can safely hold the liminality of both being in a parked car but refusing to enter public space, choosing instead to stay within the car.

Protecting Against Violence

The vulnerability and stress created by the liminal experience of parking has many facets, yet the threat of physical violence and sexual assault is the most severe. For women alone or with children, parking is an activity fraught with potential safety risks. While the previous chapter discussed how participants feel in these scenarios, this section goes a step further to demonstrate how participants use their vernacular religious parking practices as protection. For many participants, a “good” parking spot is one that mitigates the sense of gendered vulnerability as much as possible. Since the women use their vernacular religious parking practices to help them find “good parking,” it can be inferred that one of the roles of vernacular religious parking practices is to help women mitigate the sense of gendered vulnerability as much as possible.

While most of the women alluded to their parking practices helping them stay safe, Ticia stated outright that she believes the parking gods have saved her children's lives. In response to an inquiry about the importance of her practices, she said the following:

I think—I think it has saved their life. *[laughing]* I'm trying to—hold on. Okay, so let me think of the age difference. So... it'd be like—when I had all three, I'd have a seven-year-old, a four-year-old, and a two-year-old, right? So trying to walk too far (in a hot parking lot, especially). So, this would be more [a] California type of problem. I feel like most of it was down in California because it's hot. So like, say we went to Legoland or Disneyland or the faire or any of those situations. It could mean the difference between a tantrum before we even got somewhere, to the success of our whole day. So being close would take away that whole factor in how our whole day could look because it's already going to be tiring for toddlers and young kids to do anything for too long. And so just that hope—or getting back to your car at night. Maybe when it's dark and then you're thinking “Oh my gosh, I have to walk across the whole parking lot.”

Walking across large parking lots in extreme heat or during the night with three young children presents real safety concerns for both Ticia and her children. Young kids are more susceptible to heat illness, move more slowly than adults, and are less aware of their surroundings. In large parking lots, children have the potential of getting in an accident, having a tantrum that draws attention, or otherwise slowing down the process of getting back to the car, thereby extending the amount of time spent in the parking lot in a vulnerable situation. While tantrums can disrupt any parent's day, they could also risk drawing unwanted police attention for Ticia. Because she is white while her children are mixed-race and Black, strangers sometimes assumed they were not related. Thus, to protect herself and her children from potential harm, Ticia invokes her vernacular religious parking practice. The parking gods allowed Ticia to mitigate these issues of safety and

vulnerability by helping her get parking closer to her destination. By avoiding these threats, Ticia felt that she and her children were protected from harm.

Additionally, Asphalta's role as a protective figure can be seen through comparative analysis of her role and the role of the various Catholic saints discussed earlier. The name in the rhyme "Hail [name] full of Grace, help me find a parking space" is frequently interchanged between Asphalta, Agnes, Gladys, and Mary. While St. Agnes, St. Gladys, and the Virgin Mary serve as protectors against sexual assault, Asphalta has no such clear definition. However, due to the overlapping nature of Asphalta and these Catholic saints, we can infer that Asphalta too serves as a protector against sexual violence.

Cities and urban spaces can be vibrant centers of religious innovation (Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova 2013, 1, 18). Asphalta and the other vernacular religious parking practices are an example of such innovation. These practices illustrate the overlap and cross-community transmission of religious practices aimed at dealing with a shared urban fear: parking. New age, Neo-Pagan, and largely Catholic practices meld together to form a set of new vernacular rituals aimed at assisting with the safety and ease of parking. However, the fear of parking and the related vernacular religious practices appear to come from women who are largely white-passing, cis-passing, middle class, and well educated. Their anxieties around parking are often related to social fears about being a woman alone in urban environments and the threat of being sexually assaulted or attacked that comes with that.

While the overlap between Catholicism, queer and feminist identities, and new age spiritualities is interesting, a more direct comparison between Asphalta, St. Agnes, and St. Gladys can lend deeper insight into the cultural fears at play when parking. While this might at first seem innocuous, St. Agnes is a virgin martyr, thought to be a patron saint of engaged couples, victims of sexual abuse, and those seeking chastity and purity (Basilica 2021; University of Notre Dame n.d.). While the stories about Agnes vary, many depict Agnes as a beautiful young girl who is thought to have been murdered in Rome in the late third or early fourth century A.D. due to her being Christian. In these stories, Agnes turns down an offer of marriage from a princely, non-Christian (often referred to as “pagan”) suitor who will not leave her alone. She refuses him, claiming to be promised to Christ. He then reports her for being Christian to and has her publicly humiliated (she is stripped naked, but her hair is said to have covered her) before being thrown into a brothel. The men who try to touch her are either blinded or stricken dead, but she prays for them to be restored to life. Afterwards, they attempt to burn her, but the flames do not hurt her, so they behead her instead (Winstead [1997] 2018, 26, 36, 76; Carl Horstmann 1987, xxxiv; Jestice 2004, 3:24).

Agnes’s role as a virgin martyr and a patron saint of sexual assault survivors (as well as those seeking chastity) is notable. If Agnes’s role is to protect against sexual assault, yet she is called on to help find a good parking spot, then it stands to reason that she is being invoked specifically to mitigate the threat of sexual violence and vulnerability coming from the act of parking. Her being called upon, not as a saint of general protection or of travel

but as a patron saint of girls, virginity, and sexual assault victims, points to a pervasive cultural fear of sexual assault in cars, near cars, and around cars when parking. Asphalta also plays a key role in mitigating vulnerability when parking, although her functions are broader. In this case, however, Agnes and Asphalta are being called on to occupy and perform the same helpful and protective functions. Specifically, they are being asked for their help in avoiding rape.

St. Gladys is also mentioned, but her story is harder to parse. Both her husband and King Arthur wanted to abduct her, but that she ultimately was allowed to wed King Gwynllyw, a pagan. Being a good wife and mother, she converted him over time. Her abduction, the ultimate preservation of her virginity until marriage, and her role as a wife and a mother are often emphasized, thus putting her in a similarly gendered role of saint, prizing mothering, wife-roles, and the saving of oneself until marriage.

Additionally, the Virgin Mary is perhaps the most common alternative name used in place of Asphalta in the rhyme. Mary's identity as a virgin is exceptionally well known and frequently emphasized. While she is often invoked in a protective and helpful capacity for many problems, in this instance she is being called on to help protect women from sexual assault when parking. Asphalta existing in company with figures such as the Virgin Mary, St. Agnes, and St. Gladys indicate that she serves a similar protective and guiding purpose. While the liminal situation of parking creates a general-state vulnerability, the largest threat is that of sexual violence. The pointed nature of the saints used to aid in parking further reinforces the use of vernacular religious parking practices as mitigating the

threat of sexual assault when parking. While the previous chapter also established the threat of violence women experience while parking, this section demonstrates how invoking Asphalta or other practices serves as a means of protection against sexual assault and other forms of physical harm.

Manifesting Prosperity

In addition to serving a protective function, vernacular religious parking practices can also be viewed as manifesting prosperity. As mentioned in chapter one, spiritual manifestation ties together new age concepts with Christian prosperity theology. While it can be used for many things, the main goal of manifestation is to gain prosperity for oneself. Compared to prayers, wishes, spells, or other spiritual “tools” which can also be directed at others, manifestation is primarily aimed at acquiring *personal* health, wealth, and love. By using manifestation as the method for one’s vernacular religious parking practice, the specific desire for prosperity during parking is emphasized.

In her article on women’s spiritual entrepreneurship, Kira Ganga Kieffer links manifestation to Christian prosperity theology such as asking God for health and wealth (Kieffer 2020, 85).

Popularized by self-help authors as the “Law of Attraction,” women’s spiritual entrepreneurship’s focus on “manifesting abundance” through visualization and other forms of positive thinking joining a long standing twentieth-century American metaphysical tradition linking New Thought to “The Power of Positive Thinking,” to *The Secret* (2006) (Kieffer 2020, 85).

Like Christian prosperity theology, manifestation also asks for good health and prosperity, albeit by using methods such as “positive thinking” instead of prayer to a deity. Manifesting parking can be viewed as a request for good health and prosperity when parking. When the vulnerability of parking is understood, the request for good health and prosperity makes sense. Women have historically been bound to the private sphere and threatened with rape when they leave (Tye 2005, 1415; Malti-Douglas 2007, 1415). In addition, “the ideology that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’ coupled with the lower pay that women receive in most occupations has, historically, kept women tied to the private sphere” (Malti-Douglas 2007, 1415). Manifestation is used as a tool to overcome lower pay (whether or not this is successful) as evidenced by Kieffer’s work, thus severing one of the ties that keep women in the private sphere. Manifesting good health can be viewed as alleviating the other element of vulnerability women experience when leaving the private sphere: the threat of sexual assault. In this case, manifesting a parking space allows for the continued good health of the woman parking the car. By manifesting a parking spot, women ask for prosperity and well-being to mitigate the gendered vulnerability they experience when parking.

This type of spiritual manifestation is used as a spiritual tool by women to navigate the traditionally masculine public sphere while preserving feminine traits traditionally associated with hegemonic femininity. When used during the act of parking, manifestation is a means of navigating the liminal environment between the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere. The “prosperity” gained in this situation is that of a “good”

parking space. As previously discussed, successfully gaining a “good” parking space helps mitigate the vulnerability experienced by women during the act of parking, thereby allowing women to traverse the boundaries more easily between the masculine public sphere and the feminine sphere. While Sarah’s vernacular religious parking practice primarily invokes St. Agnes in the rhyme “Hail Agnes full of Grace, help me find a parking place,” she made sure to note that this version of the practice originated from her grandmother. To make it more applicable to her spiritual leanings, Sarah linked this rhyme to the concept of manifestation, saying:

My grandma uses [the rhyme] all the time, so. I just thought that that was kind of [a] unique way to bring—in my mind, I think of it as—Ohhhhh, I forgot the word. Imagining something and it coming into the world.

Manifesting?

Manifestation. There we go. Yeah, I kind view it as manifestation And I'm all about using techniques such as manifestation or just thought reframing and bringing things into the world from just the... Yeah, just thought reframing and... Yeah, that's what I like, that's what I'm passionate about, so that's why it kind of caught my attention.

For Sarah, using her grandmother’s parking rhyme can be viewed as a shortcut to manifest prosperity in the form of an ideal parking spot. The idea of using a key phrase or idea as a means of getting into the right headspace for manifestation came up for Jill as well. The following is a brief exchange held towards the end of the interview questioning how she sees the name “Doris Day” relating to manifesting parking:

So is that how you would generally say you describe it? Because that's sort of what I'm picking up from some of your stories: that the “Doris Day” is almost like a

shorthand for manifestation or the Law of Attraction and gratitude practices, kind of all in one.

It is. Absolutely.

Jill also spoke about the way manifestation impacts one's life. However, she linked spiritual manifestation to the idea of gratitude. The concept of having a "gratitude practice" or using conscious gratitude as a means of raising one's mood, energy, or vibrations is relatively common in new age spirituality. Sarah similarly commented earlier about intentionally noticing the positive elements in life as a means of attracting positive change. Jill elaborated on the similarities between gratitude practices, manifestation, and "Doris Day" parking, saying:

Oh, that's so interesting. So then you're sort of linking a gratitude practice also to the Doris Day parking. So how do those two things interrelate? When you get a spot, do you have gratitude things you say?

I don't know that I say them out loud, but I say (I think) thank you Doris or Day. But I think truly it is all the same practice.

Okay.

It's raising your vibration to what you need. It's raising your vibration so that what you feel you want, it comes to you. If I go back to that ambulance, the only thing I really wanted was to be able to not to be so dizzy, to be able to know I was okay. That's the only thing I really wanted. And the only way I'm going to get there is to stay in gratitude. Same principles as Doris Day Parking. The only thing I want is a parking place close enough to the building that I'm not going to drown getting in the door! Raise your vibrations. So I don't think they're separate. I think they're one and the same. Just different applications.

Jill links the time she was in an ambulance to the act of finding parking. To her, both are moments to have gratitude and to manifest well-being in the face of adversity. The

choice of method (gratitude, manifesting, or calling on Doris Day) is dependent on the situation, but the core of each practice is the same. For Jill, manifesting a better parking spot helps mitigate the physical vulnerability she experiences when parking.

Manifestation is enacted by women as a way of countering societal pressures (whether that is physical safety or economic inequality) keeping them in the private sphere, thereby creating a greater sense of safety and confidence in navigating the public sphere. The gendered vulnerability experienced when parking comes, in part, from the social pressures enacted upon women who traverse between the spheres. By using manifestation to help acquire a “good” parking spot, women invite prosperity and good health into their experience as a means of mitigating the vulnerability they experience.

Countering Masculinity and Connecting with Femininity

As established in previous chapters, the vulnerability women experience when parking focuses on men, masculinity, patriarchy, and modernity as the central threatening and oppressive forces. This section explores how women invoke feminine protective spirituality as a means of countering the perceived pervasive masculine elements of public spheres of society when parking.

The threat presented by patriarchal culture is nuanced. Most women do not draw clear boundaries between individual men versus the broader patriarchal culture. The threat of toxic masculinity and the pervasive nature of patriarchal culture create an environment where many women feel uncomfortable with men and masculinity, especially within public

environments. As seen in chapter two, many of the women in this study link the concept of modernity to men, masculinity, and patriarchal oppression. Women, on the other hand, are linked to nature, spirituality, and femininity. This dichotomy is not unusual. Women and femininity have historically been connected to nature, emotions, and spirituality while men and masculinity are frequently associated with modernity, science, and rationality (Malti-Douglas 2007, 1414). Because their vulnerability is in part created by systemic patriarchal oppression, many of the women in this study frame men, masculinity, and modernity as something that needs to be avoided or counterbalanced when parking.

The idea of women having a pervasive cultural fear of cars and driving (and by extension parking) is supported by a variety of works such as that written by Sarah Jain, Carol Sanger, and Margaret Walsh (Walsh 2008; Jain 2005; Sanger 1995). Tye links cars as a symbol of masculinity to the “male space of technology and consumption,” noting that automobiles are less closely associated with women and femininity (Tye 2005, 223–24).

Jain also speaks to the interconnectedness of gender, space, cars, and society, saying:

...automotive technology, engineering studies, and cultural notions of masculinity carry notions of gendered violence that have remained both central to the structuring of the kinds of violence played out by automobility and have naturalized to the point of invisibility both policy itself and mainstream social histories of the automobile. The car, not only an object or container moving through a city but a particular kind of composite, has been at least as much about defining social relations as it has been about transporting people and goods (Jain 2005, 188).

Jain goes one step further than Tye, linking cars and cultural ideas of masculinity to gendered violence that is so pervasive it is essentially invisible in public policy and this

social history of automobiles. Many of the women in this research expressed cultural ideals of masculinity, patriarchal oppression, modernity, technology, and gender violence coalescing into a single threatening presence leading to feelings of vulnerability. Calling on *Asphalta* or other vernacular religious parking practices helps mitigate this sense of vulnerability by countering the sense of patriarchal oppression.

While many women invoke feminine figures as a means of countering patriarchal oppression, most of the participants also identified an element of matriarchal spiritual transmission when sharing how they learned their vernacular religious parking practices. The link to feminine spiritual lineage, whether through family or cultural connection, also helps counter the feeling of patriarchal oppression, thereby mitigating the sense of gendered vulnerability when parking. Many of the women mentioned learning their spiritual practices from their mothers or grandmothers, while some brought up sharing a sense of spirituality with their daughters. Marny, for example, spoke at length about the lineage of women in her family in relation to her identity as a witch, saying:

I am a witch, I am a generational witch, my matrilineal line. At least three people back, at least one, two people identify that way. However, I'm from a line of nuns and midwives. And so, that kind of leads me to think that there's something going on with my ancestors. And my daughter identifies that way too, fairly recently. That's happened, but she's embraced that. Yeah, so, that's going on.

After a moment of brief conversation, Marny added:

I also went to school for four years at a witch school—at a mystery school here in town. And so I've learned I've practiced like most of my life, I think, even when I didn't know I was practicing. But your mom was actually, like,

a part of me figuring that part out. I think I've told you some of that. It's a very, very interesting story about just noticing the witch in my child.⁹ It's kind of cool. And, but yeah, I've learned how to actually do stuff. Yeah. So during that program. I learned some stuff from my mom. I learned really basic things from when I was a kid. And then I learned some more elaborate things.

Noting that she comes from a line of witches, nuns, and midwives, Marny equates these various roles, titles, and professions. To her, this is an indication of matrilineal spiritual lineage, supported by her experiences with her mother and noticing the witch in her child. Anne also brought up this idea of matrilineal spirituality continuously throughout her interview, repeatedly mentioning nuns, her time as a midwife, and the historic lineage of goddess spirituality.

For many of the women, using practices linked to matriarchal spiritual traditions provided a sense of reassurance, countering the overwhelming sense of vulnerability and systemic patriarchal oppression. To borrow from Marny's earlier quote in chapter two, she said: "I think of cities, cityscapes, cars, driving, as like kind of masculine things, as kind of like these things that I need to find beauty and power within or else it'll just make me [angry and] sad." For her, "thinking of this goddess that's actually sort of like watching over things" and "picturing how fast the cityscape can just be eaten up by the trees and the earth" is comforting. Thus, *Asphalta* and other vernacular religious parking practices help

⁹ I was aware Marny talked about spirituality and shared practices with my mom, but I am unaware of the story she is referencing here.

women mitigate their vulnerability by offsetting cultural ideas around masculinity and providing a connection to feminine spiritual lineage.

This chapter has shown the role of vernacular religious parking practices in mitigating the sense of gendered vulnerability experienced by women when parking. By invoking their practices, participants relieve the stress of liminal experiences, protect themselves from sexual assault and physical harm, manifest prosperity when parking, and counter the sense of patriarchal masculinity by connecting to feminine spiritual lineage. These vernacular religious parking practices aid in creating successful and safe parking experiences, thus allowing participants to stay out of harm's way when parking.

Conclusion

Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries.

These boundaries are both social and spatial; They define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience. - (McDowell 1999, 4).

To conclude, this chapter explores the relevance and meaning of the findings of the research. Discussing vernacular religious parking practices is certainly entertaining, but it also serves as an exploration of the social fears women experience in day-to-day life. The liminality of parking is experienced as gendered vulnerability by many women. They seek to navigate threats to their physical safety, the safety of their children, and the safety of their property, all while dealing with the natural uncertainty that comes with parking. This discussion fits into the larger conversation of gendered mobilities and violence against women.

Additionally, this research also fills a gap in the literature regarding modern urban folklore more broadly. The daily vernacular religious practices of Neo-Pagan and new age practitioners are woefully understudied. Calendar customs, rituals, and other more obvious practices have been given priority. While this more visible folklore is valuable, studying expressions of daily vernacular religion lends deeper insights into the lived realities of those who use these practices. Ethnographers of religion favor studying popular, highly visible places and practices, focusing on those that have a large degree of human action (Lesiv 2022). This renders religious folklore that is otherwise not popular or highly visible as marginal. However, the study of this “marginal” folklore belies its ability to shed light on

larger societal and political issues (Lesiv 2022). In fact, studying “micro” folklore can lead to important “macro” sociopolitical insights such as those demonstrated in this thesis. Therefore, this thesis argues that it is worth pursuing the study of small-scale daily spiritual and religious realities.

Micro folklore, such as the micro-narratives or micro-rituals that arise in this research, differ from traditional narratives, bits of “folk” knowledge, and traditional rituals. In the context of the work presented here, “micro” indicates a narrative, ritual, or practice that is deemed by the user to be insignificant, but still fits into the general category of narrative or ritual respectively. Micro-narratives are short bursts of narrative, often arising in the middle of a question-and-answer sequence. Participants would often offer shorter answers that downplayed their belief or practice, mirroring the perceived insignificance of their practices through brief narrative responses. In other words, “micro” folklore produced “micro” responses. However, as this thesis has shown, exploring “micro” folklore can lead to broad social and political insights. This chapter will summarize the main arguments of the thesis, discuss the limitations of the research, and propose directions for further research.

Summary of Main Findings

The vernacular religious parking practices discussed in this thesis have one main aim: to mitigate the vulnerability women face in the liminal situation of parking. They accomplish this goal by relieving stress when negotiating liminal space, protecting against violence, manifesting prosperity and good health, and countering masculinity. This section

will summarize the main points of the thesis, showing how the vernacular religious parking practices can be viewed as examples of feminist spiritual cultural creation aimed at alleviating the gendered vulnerability associated with parking.

Recontextualization as Feminist Spiritual Cultural Creation

Asphalta and other vernacular religious parking practices are examples of feminist spiritual cultural creation through the process of recontextualization. The feminist spiritual movement advocated for women to choose the behavior, values, images, and practices they wanted to center in the creation of a new spirituality and culture. The movement essentially advocated for conscious recontextualization as a deliberate part of second-wave feminism and feminist spirituality. The women in this thesis employed this method of cultural creation in their spiritual practices, creating personalized feminist new age and Neo-Pagan leaning spirituality. Sarah combined manifestation with her grandmother's rhyme "Hail Agnes, full of Grace, help me find a parking place," bringing together elements of Catholicism, Christianity, and new age spirituality. Anne calls on "Our Lady of Asphalta" when she wants help parking, tying goddess culture, new age spirituality, and Catholicism into a single practice. Jill took the image of actress Doris Day and used her name as a shortcut for manifesting parking, thereby combining pop culture with new age spirituality. Thus, vernacular religious parking practices are a product of feminist spiritual recontextualization.

Gendered Vulnerability Stems from the Liminality of Parking

The liminality of parking creates gendered vulnerability for women. Women as drivers of cars challenge traditional cultural boundaries that demand they stay at home, leading to a cultural backlash that employs the threat of rape, assault, and murder to frighten women into cultural compliance. Participants expressed a sense of anxiety or fear when parking alone as women, noting that they were worried about their safety and the safety of any children they had with them. The onus of responsibility is placed on the women to ensure they park responsibly enough to avoid the ramifications of sexual assault or other forms of violence. Society relies on social messaging passed down through urban legends, as well as safety advice passed between women, to convey the victim-blaming notion that it is up to women to park safely if they want to avoid violence.

Vernacular Religious Parking Practices as Coping Tools

The vernacular religious parking practices mentioned in this thesis serve as a method of coping with the gendered vulnerability of parking. They help relieve the stress associated with transitioning between the private and public spheres for children and adults. Jill and Ticia both used their vernacular religious parking practices as a method of entertaining children, while Sarah recalled her grandmother using the vernacular religious parking practice for the same purpose. During transition, the vernacular religious parking practices serve as a silly, playful form of entertainment and a family bonding ritual meant to alleviate the stress of uncertainty while parking.

Vernacular religious parking practices can also be used to protect against sexual assault and other forms of violence when parking. Most participants were afraid of being sexually harassed or assaulted when they were parking but felt that finding a good parking spot would help avoid this outcome. By avoiding the dark, isolated locations associated with bad parking spots, one avoids being assaulted. References to St. Agnes, St. Gladys, and the Virgin Mary also enforced the notion that participants were trying to protect against sexual assault as all three figures have been known to protect sexual assault survivors or preserve virginity.

These practices are also employed as part of the process of manifesting prosperity and good health. Both Sarah and Jill linked their practices to spiritual manifestation, emphasizing the importance of positive thinking in generating beneficial outcomes. The goal, however, was still to acquire good parking. A good parking place ensured prosperity and good health as it minimized the likelihood of having one's property damaged or stolen and ensured easy access to one's destination. This saves time, money, and avoids mentally or physically strenuous situations, thereby keeping one in good health.

Lastly, vernacular religious parking practices present a means of countering a culture of masculinity and patriarchal oppression. Asphalta is thought to be this feminine, earthly, grounded presence that helps to counter the harsh masculinity of urban environments. Doris Day was the epitome of the ideal American girl next door, representing mythical levels of femininity and womanhood. Additional imagery around goddess culture, nature, and feminine spiritual lineage was present in participants'

interviews as well. The masculine culture around automobiles carries notions of gendered violence that threaten women's safety in and around cars. To mitigate the sense of this vulnerability, women invoke feminine protective imagery thereby countering the overwhelming presence of patriarchal oppression.

Limitations

Due to the qualitative nature of this research coupled with the small sample size, generalizations drawn from this study are relatively niche. Additionally, given the personal nature of vernacular religious practices, it was difficult at times to draw comparisons and conclusions about the practices at hand. The vernacular religious parking practices present in this thesis have been grouped because they come from a relatively similar group of women and share a general set of similarities. In grouping these practices and people, this thesis argues they share the same general culture. However, this is the opinion of the researcher and may not be shared by the participants themselves. Additionally, due to the small sample size, individuals reading this thesis who have vernacular religious parking practices similar to the ones mentioned in this research might not find themselves or their experiences represented here in this study.

Because of the academic nature of this thesis, it has been necessary to draw boundaries and assign labels to concepts that may not reflect participants' perspectives in their day-to-day lives. For example, most participants indicated that they were spiritual or had some sort of spiritual belief. They were reticent to use the concept of "religion" to discuss what they believed or did. In order to apply useful academic frameworks to the

rituals, rhymes, and other practices in this paper, they have been referred to as “vernacular religious practices.” In academia, spirituality is discussed in the context of religion and belief, both of which are terms that are not readily welcomed by the participants themselves. Additionally, I use the concept of “gender” as framed by Butler and the field of gender studies. Not all participants define gender, or indeed experience gender, as a conscious construct all the time. The difference between being a woman, being female, and just being a person who fills certain societal roles is not always clear-cut in lived experience. Lived experiences are much messier and blurrier than outlined here in this thesis. While certain themes have been separated and highlighted from one another for the sake of academic analysis, in real life they are much more heavily intertwined.

Additionally, “good” parking is relative. For a parking spot to be good, participants consider a myriad of factors, such as car use, proximity, accessibility, and safety. Factors such as one’s age, ability, race, gender, class, religion, etc. all play into what everyone perceives as a “good” space. However, the fear of parking (and the related vernacular religious practices) stems from women who are largely white-passing, cis-passing, middle-class, and well-educated. Their anxieties around parking are often related to social fears about being a woman alone in urban environments and the threat of being sexually assaulted or attacked that comes with that. They do not mention, for example, fears of being racially profiled and harassed by the police, nor do they express concerns about having mobility-accessible parking. While this research discussed how these women used their cars as places, many houseless people use their cars as a shelter daily. The choices the

women make around car use are impacted by their position in society. Someone worried about being targeted for “lingering” or “looking suspicious” due to racial or class profiling may not make the same evaluations that the participants did. Because these women are all more or less cis-passing, no one mentioned a fear of being harassed or assaulted for looking too masculine or otherwise genderqueer, despite many of the women identifying as gender nonconforming or otherwise queer in some manner.

Directions for Further Research

This research only fills a small gap in the literature on urban new age and Neo-Pagan spiritual practices. Further research on how new age practitioners and Neo-Pagans combine their spiritual practices with urban life would be useful. Addressing this research in the context of other spiritual and religious practices related to cars, driving, and parking around the world would also be valuable. For example, an exploration of the Christian prayers to Mary when parking would be interesting. Similar examples of praying to Jesus or other figures came up when talking to friends and family from other religious backgrounds across the US, Canada, the UK, and Italy. There are likely vernacular religious parking or driving practices associated with non-Christian religions across the globe as well. Additionally, an exploration of manifesting parking would also be useful as there appeared to be many instances of manifestation-related parking practices that came up when speaking to people about this research. It also became apparent that there is a great need for the study of spiritual manifestation itself as there is very little research detailing the phenomenon at the moment. I suggest that this research be undertaken across disciplines,

such as folklore, anthropology, sociology, history, religious studies, and other fields in social science and the humanities.

In addition to exploring the dimensions of vernacular religious parking practices, it would be valuable to investigate how other communities of people experience parking. This study only explored how white-passing and cis-passing women view parking. Anne, however, indicated that she had learned of the practice from a lesbian couple, one of whom was indigenous. Exploring similar practices among native communities in the US and North America more broadly would be interesting.

Generally, increased research into how people racialized as non-white experience parking would be valuable, especially in light of the high rates of racially charged assault and murder experienced by Black and Latino men in the US at the hands of US police officers during traffic stops. It would also be prevalent to explore how people who live out of their cars view parking, again due to the increasing prevalence of homelessness in the US. Lastly, it would be valuable to gain an understanding of how people who visibly push the boundaries of binary gender experience parking. Specifically, it would be interesting to get the perspectives of femme men, trans men and women, and masculine or butch women, as these communities are subject to greater rates of violence and sexual assault. However, speaking to anyone who is openly gender diverse specifically about their experiences in public when parking would be useful. Attention should be paid to the intersectional quality of identity in relationship to parking as overlapping marginal identities tend to increase the rate at which one experiences violence.

Additionally, more research should be dedicated to the daily experience of cars. Given the ubiquity of cars in American society and the number of publications dedicated to exploring the making and driving of cars, it seems fitting to explore the way people park them as well. Topics such as luxury garages, the history of multilevel parking structures, the act of eating your lunch in your car, why it has been considered polite to open car doors for your date, the culture of long-range truck drivers, and much more could lend valuable insight into the lives Americans live in cars.

Lastly, future research on this topic should strive to employ a wide variety of research methods where possible, as there was very little existing research on parking in general. Demographic research of various kinds (such as large-scale surveys and polls), methods of ethnographic research beyond semi-structured interviews, historical analysis, etc. should be employed to get a fuller sense of parking practices as a whole. The semi-structured interview questions used in this research were designed to be fairly open-ended to see how participants connected gender to their vernacular religious parking practices themselves. It would have been useful, however, to use reciprocal ethnography during the processing stage of the results. Because there was a large degree of narrative analysis aimed at extrapolating meaning from people's stories, the conclusions drawn in this thesis may not be reflective of the opinions of the participants. It would have been useful to get their thoughts on the analysis to make sure that their voices were represented as accurately as possible. As it stands, this thesis makes a good faith attempt to reflect the reoccurring

themes noticed in the interviews, but future research would benefit from using reciprocal ethnography.

Conclusion

In summation, vernacular religious parking practices are examples of feminist spirituality aimed at mitigating the vulnerability women experience when parking. They are funny, silly, and unique. For women on the West Coast of the US, these practices assure them that they will successfully navigate the stressful act of parking no matter the challenge. Running late and need a parking spot nearby? Forget the umbrella at home during the biggest rainstorm that week? Wrangling three children in and out of a grocery store? Call Asphalta. She's got the parking spot just for you.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about who you are? What is your gender and sexuality identity?
2. What religious or spiritual beliefs do you hold, if any?
3. When did you first encounter the Parking Goddess¹⁰ or how did you learn about the Parking Goddess?
4. Who is the Parking Goddess to you? For example, does the Parking Goddess have a form you can describe, a specific zone of influence, or any other distinguishing characteristics?
5. Can you describe any imagery, sounds, scents, ideas, or objects that you associate with the Parking Goddess?
6. To what extent do you invoke, pray to, talk/joke about, or engage with the Parking Goddess? How do you do this?
7. During what times and activities do you find yourself thinking about or engaging with the Parking Goddess?
8. What is your parking process? How do you choose a parking spot?

¹⁰ I may use alternatives names for the deity here, such as Asphalta, Asphaltia, or any others that are appropriate. I will use “the Parking Goddess” in this document to refer to the deity in a general sense, but I will use the name of the deity that the participant knows in the interview itself.

9. What emotions do you feel during the process of parking?
10. Are you more often the driver or the passenger in the car? Do you think about or engage with the Parking Goddess more or less depending on whether or not you are the driver or passenger?
11. Have you ever thought about, spoken about, or otherwise engaged with the Parking Goddess outside of the process of parking?
12. Can you tell me any stories or anecdotes that involve the Parking Goddess?
13. What is the most memorable experience you have had related to the Parking Goddess?
14. What do you feel when you think about or engage with the Parking Goddess?
15. Do you ever think about or engage with a different force or deity NOT the Parking Goddess the process of parking? If so, can you tell me about that?

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval



Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)

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www.mun.ca/research/ethics/humans/icehr

ICEHR Number:	20230242-AR
Approval Period:	August 5, 2022 – August 31, 2023
Funding Source:	
Responsible Faculty:	Dr. Sarah Gordon Department of Folklore
Title of Project:	<i>Narratives of Gender and Sexuality in Stories about the Parking Goddess</i>

August 5, 2022

Sujittra Avery Carr
Department of Folklore
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Memorial University

Dear Sujittra Avery Carr:

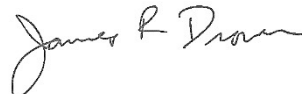
Thank you for your correspondence addressing the issues raised by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) for the above-named research project. ICEHR has re-examined the proposal with the clarifications and revisions submitted, and is satisfied that the concerns raised by the Committee have been adequately addressed. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*, the project has been granted *full ethics clearance* for **one year**. ICEHR approval applies to the ethical acceptability of the research, as per Article 6.3 of the *TCPS2*. Researchers are responsible for adherence to any other relevant University policies and/or funded or non-funded agreements that may be associated with the project. If funding is obtained subsequent to ethics approval, you must submit a Funding and/or Partner Change Request to ICEHR so that this ethics clearance can be linked to your award.

The *TCPS2* **requires** that you **strictly adhere to the protocol and documents as last reviewed** by ICEHR. If you need to make additions and/or modifications, you must submit an Amendment Request with a description of these changes, for the Committee's review of potential ethical

concerns, before they may be implemented. Submit a Personnel Change Form to add or remove project team members and/or research staff. Also, to inform ICEHR of any unanticipated occurrences, an Adverse Event Report must be submitted with an indication of how the unexpected event may affect the continuation of the project.

The *TCPS2* **requires** that you submit an Annual Update to ICEHR before **August 31, 2023**. If you plan to continue the project, you need to request renewal of your ethics clearance and include a brief summary on the progress of your research. When the project no longer involves contact with human participants, is completed and/or terminated, you are required to provide an annual update with a brief final summary and your file will be closed. All post-approval ICEHR event forms noted above must be submitted by selecting the ***Applications: Post-Review*** link on your Researcher Portal homepage. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,



James Drover, Ph.D.
Ethics in Human Research

Vice-Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on

JD/bc

cc: Supervisor – Dr. Sarah Gordon, Department of Folklore