WOMEN’S PILGRIMAGE AS REPERTOIRIC PERFORMANCE: CREATING GENDER AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITY THROUGH RITUAL

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ABSTRACT

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Through the spiritual practice of contemporary spirituality, women pilgrims perform and constitute gendered and spiritual identities in ways that are often highly unorthodox. However, pilgrimage allows participants to re-see religious history, so as to legitimize their alternative identities. In this study, I sought to discover how pilgrims constituted their identities in new ways through pilgrimage. I considered three pilgrimages in particular: a Catholic pilgrimage to Rome in search of the history of women’s ordination, through which the pilgrims re-defined the meaning of bread-breaking and “priestliness”; a mother–daughter journey to Crete, through which the women created new gender roles for themselves as manifestations of the Goddess; and a woman’s experience in a temple in Malta, through which she took on the role of an ancient priestess incubating a healing dream.

I analyzed how pilgrims’ performances “make meaning” in three ways. First, I turned to Diana Taylor’s ideas about the archive and the repertoire, and suggested that pilgrims frame their performances as legitimate spiritual practices by situating them within the “orthodoxy” of the archive. However, these pilgrims engage in “performances of challenge” through which they destabilize the archive’s claim to sole interpretive authority. Using the repertoire’s other “ways of knowing,” pilgrims remember or imagine the “past” and connect to their spiritual ancestors. Then, using Judith Butler’s suggestion that performances effectively constitute identity, I claimed that these pilgrims used ritual to constitute identities and knowledge that, although alternative, are not “false,” and which therefore expanded the range of “legitimate” identity performances available to spiritual women. Third, as ritualists such as Tom Driver have suggested, ritual performances are transformative and have the power to effect change. Because
they work in a mode of “ritual paradox,” rituals can bring the ideal – the imagined past, pilgrims’ new identities, and the hoped-for future – into the present. As Driver suggested, these ritual performances lead naturally into performances in the “confessional” and “ethical” modes of performance, through which pilgrims claim new identities, challenge patriarchal systems, and work for continued, ongoing transformation of their church and world.
“The vision of a different world of justice makes us dreamers.”
– Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
For my mother, Rebecca McGuire Baker
my grandmothers, Julia Rosser McGuire and Marilyn Woolever Baker
my beloved aunt, Charlotte Joy McGuire, in memory
with love and gratitude for their lived examples of *imago Dei*

For my sisters, Kati and Elizabeth
in anticipation of the new paths we’ll seek out

And for Liz,
at the beginning
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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

“Pilgrims are poets who create by taking journeys.”
– Richard Niebuhr, qtd. in Kidd and Taylor 7

Deep in a small, underground catacomb on the outskirts of Rome, a group of Christian women break bread together, away from the eyes of male priests and church authorities who might try to mediate their ritual or stop it altogether. In a small stone circle high in the hills of Crete, a mother leads her daughter through a ritual initiating her into womanhood. Excited and nervous, the teenage girl in ceremonial dress accepts the tokens representing the Goddess and eats ceremonial foods, which her mother promises will help her understand the mysteries and power of adulthood and sacred sexuality. In a small temple in Malta, a woman rests on a stone slab. Acting as a priestess to the resident goddess, she incubates a healing dream.

These rituals all took place in the last fifteen years or so, as women embarked on pilgrimages to ancient sites that are sacred to their spiritual traditions. What is remarkable about them is that, according to the participants, these descriptions might just as accurately apply to similar rituals performed at the same sites by other women, hundreds or thousands of years ago. As the pilgrims perform rituals – and their own identities – in ways that may seem highly unorthodox to outside observers, they claim an embodied connection to these other, ancient women. Thus, by aligning their performances with those of their “spiritual ancestors,” these pilgrims legitimize their own alternative performances. Although their interpretations of history, religious tradition, and women’s roles run counter to the official traditions and the archive-based positions of those in authority, these pilgrims lay claim to an even older tradition: that of the performances kept alive through the repertoire.
In my research, therefore, I suggest that pilgrimages and related rituals—part of what Diana Taylor calls “the repertoire”—can serve as the means by which participants can challenge established expectations for gender and spirituality, perform “women’s roles” in new ways, and even work to transform those expectations within society. As Della Pollock suggests, such performance is “the process by which meanings, selves, and other effects are produced. As such, it is also more promissory than directly effective. It is the embodied process of making meaning” (20). To that end, I analyze these pilgrimages through performance theory and ritual theory, both of which point to the **efficacy** of the performance of ritual. For example, Judith Butler, Tom Driver, and Jill Dolan, among others, suggest that such rituals are **performative**, **transformative**, and **utopian** (respectively), and so can in fact create change.

**DEFINITION OF PILGRIMAGE**

The term “pilgrimage” describes an ancient (even pre-ancient) spiritual practice, in which participants (“pilgrims”) travel to a site that is considered particularly sacred, and can involve rituals performed on the journey and/or at the sacred site.\(^1\) Put simply, pilgrimage is “a sacred journey to a sacred place with a sacred purpose” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 482). This “sacred” nature is usually, but not necessarily, religious; nonetheless it is always considered “sacred” or “of utmost importance” by the pilgrim.\(^2\) Thus, by “pilgrimage,” “it is meant simply that one or more people travel with the purpose in whole or part of visiting, seeing, or touching a

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\(^1\) Although pilgrimage may be commonly understood as a specifically Christian tradition, that background is hotly contested. Pilgrimage was a part of the worship at the ancient cult-centers in Greece and Rome, and its history may stretch even further back. It is also a key part of Muslim worship and is practiced among other religious traditions (including Goddess worship).

\(^2\) Although religious in origin, the word “pilgrimage” is now also used to refer to similar journeys to important but non-sacred destinations (such as the Vietnam wall or an ancestor’s birthplace). For the purposes of this study, my examples are limited to sacred religious sites. Furthermore, I will not be concerned with teasing out the distinction between “pilgrimage” and “religious tourism,” taking for granted that all pilgrimages inevitably include some amount of tourism as well (and that this tourism does not invalidate the pilgrimage).
physical place or thing that is in some manner associated with ultimate or nearly ultimate concerns” (Blasi 159).

Pilgrimage’s “sacred” destination, then, is its first defining characteristic. This site may be considered “sacred” for any number of reasons. Describing sites such as Rome, Jerusalem, and Mecca, Turner and Turner note that some sites are associated with “the birth, mission, and death of the founder and his closest kin and disciples” (33). Other pilgrimage shrines are associated with “the places where saints and martyrs lived and died”; these sites remind pilgrims that their religion “has objective efficacy derived from the founder’s god or gods and transmitted by means of miracles, wonders, and signs through saints, martyrs, and holy men, often through the medium of their relics” (Turner and Turner 34). Still other pilgrimage sites are held sacred because they are believed to be links, not just with the history of the religion, but with the very presence of a divinity or supernatural spirit. For example, some are “locations where the sacred power of ‘Gaia’ – the term widely used in New Age to refer to Earth as a living organism – is manifest and can be accessed in this world” (Reader 213). What sets pilgrimage apart from other religious rituals, then, is the sacred importance of the destination site.

The second defining characteristic of pilgrimage is its purpose: the pilgrims’ desire for change. Some pilgrims seek “spiritual purification,” often in the form of blessings or miracles. Others perform rituals that allow them to connect with a god or goddess, or that encourage some sort of transformative connection with a divine spirit or supernatural force. Pilgrims may also take the journey because it allows a connection with the principles or history of one’s religion, or even with the other adherents of one’s faith. One pilgrim to Waslingham in England said this:

“You come here and […] you realise that what you do back [home] in say a church that was built at the end of the last century has been going on in some of
these churches for seven or eight centuries, and it makes you feel that you are part of something which is more than … just local, just the way we do it, just the way people have been doing it in my lifetime.” (qtd. in Coleman and Elsner 54)

For others, a desire for pilgrimage is sparked by a personal transition or a need for change: “‘We travel as seekers after answers that we cannot find at home’” (Ozorak 62). Whether they are seeking healing, direct connection with divinity, or to see themselves as situated within history, the goal for many pilgrims is personal transformation. For many, this transformation can or does lead to much wider change, as pilgrims come to perform their identities differently or relate differently to the world around them. Thus, “[t]he world does look different from the edge than it does from the center. Many [pilgrims] return home hoping to make their center a little more like the edge, believing that, as Westwood puts it, ‘The transformation of the world around us will be the result of personal transformation’” (Ozorak 78).

Broadly stated, then, pilgrimage involves a faith-based journey to, and performance at, a sacred site. This journey is usually undertaken out of a desire for change, and pilgrims are often transformed by the experience.

JUSTIFICATION FOR PILGRIMAGE

The performance of pilgrimage is a useful “text” to study because these journeys may serve as the means by which women participants can challenge established expectations for gender and spirituality, perform “women’s roles” in new ways, and even work to transform those expectations within society. Throughout this dissertation, pilgrimage offers an opportunity to study women’s formations, transformations, and performances of their identities. These identities are both gendered and spiritual, and those two categories can rarely be isolated. For
example, a Catholic woman’s religious beliefs inform her performance of her gendered identity, while her gender, femininity, and experience of being a woman shape her performance of her Catholicism. In the same way, a woman who sees herself as a manifestation of the goddess or as performing in the role of a goddess’s priestess will find that her gender and her spirituality are intertwined; even the words “goddess” or “priestess” make gender and spirituality inseparable. This idea is supported by Butler’s statement:

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive […] because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (4–5)

Because gender constantly “intersects with” other “modalities” of identity performance, such as spirituality – as it does when constituted and maintained through ritual and pilgrimage – it is inseparable from spirituality. Instead, one’s spirituality is part of how one constitutes and maintains one’s gender. The converse is also true; as King notes, spirituality must not be understood as something apart from or as something added on to life. Rather, it is something which permeates all human activities and experiences rather than being additional to them. Spirituality can be described as a process of transformation and growth, an organic and dynamic part of human development, of both individual and society. (5)

For Butler, gender does not pre-exist one’s constitution of identity, but is being continually produced through performance; for King, one’s identity does not pre-exist spirituality, but is
continually permeated by spirituality in an ongoing process of transformation. The two cannot be separated, and for this reason pilgrimage is useful for a study of such identity performances: it does not claim that only one “modality” of identity performance is present in some “pure” form, or establish a duality in which one is privileged over the other. Certainly, there are other rituals that could be studied in similar ways; in particular, contemporary trends in women’s development of alternative liturgies and rituals might prove equally fruitful. Nonetheless, pilgrimage is particularly suitable for this study.

In part, this is because of recent growth trends in pilgrimage, both as a spiritual practice and as an academic subject. Turner noted that pilgrimages, “like many other liminal or underground, as opposed to mainline, manifestations of the religious […] are surfacing once again as significant, visible social phenomena, as they have surfaced in the past in periods of destructuration and rapid social change” (172). More recently, Reader has concurred: “Across the globe, pilgrimage centres associated with just about every religious tradition, as well as some that are independent of any organised religious tradition, have been receiving growing numbers of pilgrims,” both from established religious traditions and from alternative forms of spiritual culture (211). In looking at both strains of spiritual traditions (i.e., established, Catholic and alternative, goddess-seeking), Turner’s mention of “rapid social change” seems particularly relevant. It suggests that my focus on the “destructuration” of traditional identity performances and gender roles is not inappropriate, or a teasing-out of an insignificant detail, but reflects one of contemporary (and ancient, and medieval) pilgrimage’s most central features.

Pilgrimage is also useful to study because it is an alternative practice that works outside of “orthodoxy” – and yet also claims legitimacy. For this reason, it allows participants to “rewrite orthodoxy” and expand the legitimate options that are available for their performances
of identity. Throughout this study, I suggest that pilgrims' performances work outside of, challenge, claim, and rewrite “orthodoxy” or “legitimacy.” By “orthodoxy,” I am referring to those tenets, doctrines, ideologies, interpretations, and traditions that seem to have the strongest claims to “authority” or are seen as “official.” The word is most obviously tied to religious orthodoxy: certain doctrines are “orthodox,” not only because they are ostensibly drawn from scripture or creed, but also because they are legitimized by papal decree (i.e., the Catholic Church is not authorized to ordain women) or even by tradition (i.e., Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute). Within western society, patriarchal systems, by virtue of being “traditional” and because they are validated by those in authority, are also understood as orthodox; anyone seeking to undermine patriarchy or challenge its position of dominance has an uphill battle to fight. Tied to this, women’s power and sexuality may be seen as dangerous or unorthodox, in that these performances of identity do not fit within a patriarchally constructed, “traditional” notion of what makes for legitimate “women” and “women’s roles.”

As Diana Taylor points out, archival systems – particularly written histories and theologies – are seen as more inherently legitimate than the performances of the repertoire, because we are accustomed to thinking that the written word has more authority or permanence than “ephemeral” performance. Because of this, she says, there is a “rift” “between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice / knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19). For this reason, in a contest between archivists (e.g., historians, theologians, or archaeologists) and performers (e.g., storytellers, pilgrims, or performers), the first group can claim the authority of scholarship and even science while the second group is considered “alternative” at best. Even in the highly unscientific matter of sensing supernatural forces or the
presence of divinity, as at an archaeological excavation of an ancient religious temple, the ideas espoused through repertoiric performance have difficulty competing with the ideas voiced by scholars or legitimized through academic publication. In these ways, then, “orthodoxy” or “legitimacy” is used to describe the “official” positions, supported by authority or tradition.

In contrast, pilgrims’ rituals and identity performances often challenge this “orthodoxy,” denying its claim to sole or ultimate interpretive authority. For example, they may suggest that archaeologists have misinterpreted a “historical site” which the pilgrims see as a sacred temple dedicated to an ancient goddess, or they may claim that centuries of historians and theologians have erased women’s religious history, and therefore do not have an accurate understanding of either church history or women’s roles throughout history. Pilgrims often do this in three main ways: first, through pilgrimage, they journey away from established church and status quo; second, they do so to re-see or re-interpret the historical meaning of ancient sites; and third, through ritual, they appeal to the authority of the repertoire to access an alternative historical narrative. In these ways, pilgrimage can be what I am calling a “performance of challenge,” a physical, unignorable embodiment of the belief that the orthodoxies of archive and status quo are not the sole arbiters of historical interpretation or of legitimacy, and of the value of the repertoire as an alternative, also legitimate, “way of knowing” (Taylor xvi).

I suggest that these pilgrims then use ritual to “rewrite orthodoxy,” by claiming that some other idea (i.e., the temple’s sacred purpose or the need for egalitarian, not gender-defined, roles) is also or even more legitimate than the “official” position. It is here that pilgrimage’s characteristic “sacred site” becomes vital: pilgrims may claim that site’s “sacred” meaning or their “direct connection” with divine or supernatural forces as authorities that supersede the authority of human-made “orthodoxy.” Less overtly, but central to this study, pilgrims also
“rewrite orthodoxy” by creating meaning through performance. As Judith Butler suggests, performed identities (such as gender) cannot be judged as “more true” or “less true”; therefore, by performing one’s gendered, spiritual identity in an “alternative” way, the pilgrim gives physical shape to her claim that this “alternative” is no less “true” than any other identity performance, no matter how more or less “orthodox” an outsider might judge them.

Pilgrimage constitutes meaning outside of orthodoxy in two main ways, which I will consider in turn. First, pilgrimage challenges or works outside of established “orthodoxy.” Pilgrimage is able to do so because it is inherently anti-status-quo. Indeed, “[p]ilgrims are marginal people of major religions – or regarded as suspect by official ecclesiastical hierarchy. Pilgrimages are seen as anti-structural or anti-status quo” (Morgan 566). That is, whereas church and established religion have a tendency to be conservative and reinforce existing beliefs, other, more liminal rituals such as pilgrimage can see and work differently. James T. Morgan suggests that a religion’s “official” memory and homeland are “conservative” and “tend to become fixed,” but that the “anti-structural,” “outward pull of pilgrimage provides a healthy counterbalance to this overwhelming inward tug” (560). That is, the major religions, with their traditions, dogma, orthodoxies, and permanent buildings, encourage worship that works within those traditions and reinforces those beliefs. In contrast, worship that is unregulated by dogma and that journeys away from those buildings challenges that conservatism.

What is particularly notable about this “outward pull of pilgrimage” is that it still works within the established, legitimate bounds of the relevant religious tradition. Pilgrims journey “beyond, but not necessarily outside, the organized and orthodox boundaries of their established belief system” (Morgan 560). Although these pilgrims may be transformed in ways that
challenge the religion’s conservatism, tradition, and orthodoxy, this transformation is marked by the presence of divinity or the sacredness of the site, and so is non-traditional but nonetheless legitimate and within the bounds of the religious tradition. In this way, pilgrimage – and the transformation of identity that may accompany it – can be a resistance to religious tradition, but a resistance still working within the religion:

Going on pilgrimage or becoming a pilgrim might be termed a piece of active or passive resistance by individuals or groups of individuals within an established faith. The pilgrims serve as a counterpoise to the all too comfortable existence of a people who believed they are the elect or enlightened ones thanks to guaranteed message of memory (the tradition) and possessed land (the sacred center). (566)

In this way, whereas traditional “orthodoxy” claims ultimate or sole authority of interpretation, thus limiting performance possibilities by determining which identity performances are legitimate, pilgrimage works from within the religious tradition to challenge the status quo and suggest alternative, but equally legitimate, options. Therefore, it is the paradoxical way in which pilgrimage both works within religious tradition and simultaneously challenges and resists that tradition which allows it to be such an effective transformative force.

Pilgrimage also challenges traditional orthodoxy because it “re-sees” history. History and “the past” are undeniably vital to church tradition and orthodoxy, but within this tradition and the daily worship that reinforces it, “the past” is mediated by tradition, sacred texts, and established interpretations. In contrast, pilgrimage encounters “the past” face-to-face. Just as there is often no priest to mediate the presence of divinity, there may be no tradition or text to mediate and interpret the past. Instead, the pilgrim is, often quite literally, situated within the past, encountering sites, altars, frescoes, and buildings that were sites of active worship hundreds
or thousands of years ago. As she walks into and faces “the past,” she must interpret for herself what made this site sacred then – and what makes it sacred for her today. The history of pilgrimage sites are often (perhaps almost always) contested or uncertain. Some sites are claimed by more than one religion; at others, the worshipers feelings and beliefs about a site may challenge or contradict archaeologists’ “official” interpretations. The “history” of pilgrimage sites may have been passed down, not by the sacred, canonized texts of a religion, but by oral tradition, myth, or artwork that is open to multiple interpretations. Thus, while worshipers at their home church may find that “the past” has already been interpreted and established for them, with no room for challenge, “the past” of pilgrimage sites can be understood, intuited, felt, or re-written in new ways. A woman who feels stifled by weekly church worship may find that pilgrimage allows her to understand her religion’s “history” differently or to focus on other elements of “the past”; in this way, she might imagine the other forms her spiritual identity might take – forms supported by her interpretation of the pilgrimage site’s history.

These alternative negotiations of history, referent, and identity might be considered postmodern. Specifically, some pilgrims perform gendered identity roles that move between “strategic essentialism,” ironic self-commentary, and complete disruption, while others, particularly goddess worshipers, seek out a pastiche-like collection of religious traditions from which to choose. With Linda Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism* in mind, I suggest that some such pilgrims do follow the postmodern move to “[reinstall] historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, [problematicize] the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). Or, as Umberto Eco puts it, “the past […] must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently” (qtd. in Hutcheon 90). Thus, some of the pilgrims I study use pilgrimage as a means of acknowledging patriarchy as a “system of signification” that can be interrogated and disrupted;
others may allow for varying levels of irony as they “revisit” an irrecoverable, pre-patriarchal past. In both ways, they challenge monolithic interpretations of “the past,” “revisiting,” interacting, and reinterpreting history. Furthermore, I believe that pilgrimage is particularly fertile ground for identity creation when, as is often the case, the “past” it references is contested; such moments allow pilgrims to rewrite the past (or invent it anew) in ways that make room for their desired transformation of gender-role identity and spiritual identity within the present.  

Pilgrimage is also able to challenge orthodoxy because it claims the authority of the repertoire, not the archive. Diana Taylor suggests that the “flesh-and-blood performance” of what she calls “the repertoire” is a legitimate way of knowing and transmitting a culture’s history, traditions, and practices (20). Unlike the “archive” of documents and other seemingly fixed knowledge, the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). “Orthodoxy” is largely dependent upon the archive, and indeed, due to “colonial notions that the archival and biological are more lasting or accurate than embodied performance practice,” writing and other archival types of knowledge are typically construed as more authoritative than repertoric performance (173). However, pilgrims claim that their embodied performances also function as “an episteme, a way of knowing” (xvi). By appealing to the repertoire, pilgrims suggest that there are other “ways of knowing” other than that which has been codified by tradition. Furthermore, using performance studies to frame and study pilgrimage allows us to “expand what we understand by ‘knowledge’” and to “take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices” – that is, the practices of pilgrimage – “as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (16, 26).
Such alternative transmission of knowledge is particularly important to the pilgrimages I study below, in that the “social memory” transmitted through rituals (i.e., that of ancient goddess worshipers or early Christian woman priests) has often been silenced, erased, or forgotten, and repertoiric performances such as pilgrimage are the only ways to “make visible those social actors, scenarios, and power relations that have been overlooked and disappeared” (Taylor 278). By suggesting that the archive is flawed and limited (in that it can only transmit the orthodoxies that have been recorded, not those that are passed on in other ways), pilgrimage offers an alternative – but equally legitimate – “way of knowing” about spirituality both past and present.

After pilgrimage challenges or works outside of established orthodoxy, the second way in which it constitutes meaning outside of orthodoxy is that it “rewrites orthodoxy” by legitimizing alternative performances. The main way it does so is by appealing to the ancientness of the spiritual practice, the sacredness of the site, and the directness of the connection to the divine it offers to the pilgrim. Thus, pilgrimage is a good place to do the work of challenging traditional expectations and creating new alternatives is because pilgrimage itself is such an ancient practice. The phrase “going on pilgrimage” evokes images of martyrs and saints, holy people on their knees, and millennia of self-sacrifice. Moreover, Kaelber’s definition of pilgrimage as “a means of spiritual purification” highlights the transformation – often at great personal cost – that is expected to accompany pilgrimage (51). Due to these traditional notions of pilgrimage, it is not surprising when a pilgrim returns with a transformed identity. No matter how radical the pilgrim’s chosen site, rituals, or new identity may be, they are nonetheless colored by the long religious history and sacred purpose that are inextricably tied up with the word “pilgrimage.”

Linked to that, pilgrimage is an ideal ritual to study because – more so than any other religious ritual – it works through the sacredness of the site. The site is worthy of pilgrimage
because of the presence of divinity, the supernatural, or other “ultimate concerns” (Blasi 159). The pilgrim often believes that God has been here, God’s work has been done here, or that the divine spirit herself can be accessed in this place. For example, “The tirtha or sacred shrine is supposedly where the veil between this world and the other is the thinnest – allowing for easier passage from one to the other. In this way, the tirtha becomes a place of inspiration, revelation, and encounter with the divine. It is a ‘spiritual ford’ – a place of crossing” (York 143).

Moreover, the sacredness of the pilgrimage site encourages a direct connection between the pilgrim and the divine, transforming the pilgrim. In most church services, the presence of God is mediated through a priest (whether literally, as in Catholic worship, or in practice, as in the ways in which only elite leaders – usually men – are permitted to distribute the communion wine or pray aloud). In contrast, the pilgrim journeying to a site of “encounter with the divine” does not meet God in the body of the priest (York 143). Instead, she may feel a sacred presence, believe that she is communing with a divine spirit, sense that she is repeating the actions of or worshipping in the same way as ancient priestesses or apostles, or in some other way feel a direct, unmediated link with Goddess or God. Because this feeling is visceral, intuitive, unpredictable, and unregulated by tradition, it can be transformative in ways that, whether sought-out or unexpected, can be known in the body and, to the pilgrim, be unchallengable. Therefore, if the pilgrim’s transformed identity is understood to be the result of an “encounter with the divine,” made especially possible at this “place of crossing,” then it is legitimized by that encounter. For the pilgrim, the presence of divinity transforms her and sets her apart, and, moreover, marks that transformation as legitimate, even holy. Therefore, the ancientness of the practice of pilgrimage (and its longstanding connection to holy people) and the presence of divinity can make new, nontraditional, and even counter-cultural identity roles legitimate. Thus, by going on pilgrimage,
using ritual to create and shape new identity roles, and re-interpreting the “history” of the pilgrimage site, the pilgrims can then claim those new roles as not unorthodox but, in fact, spiritually legitimate by connecting them to the history and sacredness of the site and the ritual.

Finally, I suggest another way in which pilgrimage legitimizes alternative identity performances: because it is and works through ritual. As I discuss in greater depth in the next chapter, ritual is a transformative practice, in that the participants perform and embody the ideal, the “what could be but is not yet,” and therefore, through their bodies, bring the ideal into existence. “It is through performance that people make such intangibles as identities visible”; thus, pilgrims are able to use ritual to perform and embody new, ideal, or nontraditional gender and spiritual identities (Leeds-Hurwitz 101). Furthermore, this embodiment of identity, as Judith Butler points out, is an act “which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (190). She continues: “If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (192). Thus, by performing ritualized aspects of identity, pilgrims are in fact constituting that identity and bringing it into existence. The new identity roles can then become not only ideal, but real, as they are performed.

Furthermore, as Butler suggests, these new identity “attributes” are not “false,” although they may be startlingly different from culturally accepted norms. “If gender attributes and acts,” she writes, “are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. […] Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived” (192–93).
Through ritual, pilgrims can perform their ideal or imagined gender and spiritual identity; because this performance is *performative*, and because the ritual is *transformative*, that ideal identity can be brought into *real* existence, temporarily or permanently changing the pilgrim.

With that understanding of pilgrimage in mind, I have analyzed selected pilgrimage narratives in depth, considering the ways in which these pilgrims perform their gender and spiritual identity roles and work to transform what roles can be considered “orthodox” or “spiritually legitimate.” Specifically, I focus on *women’s* pilgrimages. This choice is important because of the significant ways in which women, feminism, gender studies, and arguments for equality are influencing worship in contemporary religion, particularly the Christian church. “Women’s spirituality” is an important field, not only in Women’s Studies departments but in churches as well; in large numbers, women are claiming spiritual equality, calling for “gender-inclusive” language to refer to God, rewriting liturgies, and creating rituals to be performed both in church services and among groups of women. Thus, religious women’s identity roles, which are shaped by an understanding of both spirituality and gender, are in flux in the Western world today. For this study, I have focused on two types of pilgrimages that make room for this flux and encourage transformation of the pilgrims’ identities in these ways.

First, I turn to the still-developing strain of modern-day Catholic pilgrimage that is focused on affirming women’s participation in the Church, both by identifying sites that suggest the importance of women to the early Christian church, and by performing rituals that emphasize and value their female participants’ gender. Because they acknowledge the importance of church history and theology, such pilgrims work to re-read that history and theology, and, in doing so, to situate their own (gendered) spiritual practices as legitimate, historically grounded, and orthodox.
Next, I examine the patterns of pilgrimage and ritual performance that are important to the spiritual and gendered identity formation of contemporary Goddess worshipers. These pilgrimages are widely varied in terms of site, form, and even belief (and disbelief) in a deity or deities; I am particularly interested in their intriguing relationship with the past, in that they often claim legitimacy by situating themselves in continuity with a pre-patriarchal history that they cling to as essential, even as they acknowledge that such an ancient past is unknowable.

Within this research, I have chosen three specific examples (the FutureChurch pilgrimage and two goddess-related journeys) because I believe they complement each other in fruitful ways. Contemporary Catholicism and goddess spirituality are two very different religious traditions, with different relationships to history, orthodoxy, and society. Despite the strong contrasts between these two spiritual practices, their similarities allow for useful comparison within this study. For example, each is contemporary, working within a cultural moment in which “the role of women” and the role of religion and spirituality in society are very much in flux, and each use ritual to afford their participants a “communal history” and a sense of healing or wholeness. In contemporary spirituality, negotiating one’s own spiritual identity and the ways one performs one’s gender is thorny ground – and yet allows for significant movement. For example, performing the role of good Catholic woman while both of those categories (religion and gender) are shifting, can be a powerful act. Furthermore, these pilgrimages allow their participants to claim that their performances are “legitimate” because they are in line with established religious tradition. For example, by placing their pilgrimage within the catacombs of Rome (an “origin” site for the first-century Christian church), and then claiming that this sacred site reflects important women’s roles within the early Christian church, contemporary Catholic pilgrims suggest that women’s ordination is not a new gendered / spiritual practice but is
legitimate, historically grounded, and orthodox. Many Goddess pilgrims, as well, claim legitimacy for their spiritual performances by situating themselves in line with a pre-patriarchal and Bronze Age goddess worship that they see as a historically grounded, “orthodox” religious tradition. In these and other ways, these two types of pilgrimage work in complimentary ways, revealing important similarities and significant differences, through which I explore a wide range of ways in which women’s pilgrimages can be transformative performances of identity.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Throughout my research and analysis, I have addressed three sets of questions. First: In what ways do these pilgrimages allow, encourage, or make room for the female participant to create, perform, and/or negotiate her gender identity, and in what ways is that performance of gender related to the participant’s construction and performance of her spiritual identity?

These examples each work within a context in which gender and women’s roles are significant issues: specifically, the contemporary Catholic Church and the formation of a non-patriarchal spirituality. Thus, I believe, the women who choose to go on these pilgrimages will often be concerned with questions of gender roles. However, this question cannot be separated from that of spiritual identity or religious roles; within the context of religious pilgrimage, the two issues continually inform and affect each other.

My second question is this: In what ways do these pilgrimages negotiate history and “the past” in order to create or develop the religion’s “cultural memory”? And, with that, in what ways is “orthodoxy” or religious legitimacy important to the performance of these pilgrimages?

Certainly, the centuries-old practice of pilgrimage is tied to religious tradition and cultural memory. In many ways, I believe, the questions its participants ask about gender and
spiritual identity are also tied to religious orthodoxy – for Catholic pilgrims, for example, pilgrimage is a way of seeking out evidence of women’s leadership in the early church, in order to legitimize their own participation and interest in ordination. In ways that are quite different and yet strikingly similar, many goddess pilgrims seek to discover, perform, or even create an ancient religious tradition as a means of establishing their faith as “orthodox” as well.

Finally, I address this question: Are these pilgrimages transformative? That is, can the participant actually transform her self-understanding and performance of her gender and/or spiritual identity, through ritual, in ways that are permanently efficacious, and even in ways that affect her surrounding society or culture upon her return from the pilgrimage?

The power of ritual is that it is transformative – that it can effect change. Working in a mode of ritual paradox, ritual performers can, by embodying a new identity or social structure, bring it into being. Although analyzing individual change is better suited to ethnographic study, I am able to consider how pilgrimage, as a ritual performance, does or could create change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I ground my study of women’s pilgrimage as performance within scholarship on feminist theology, women’s liturgical rituals, and pilgrimage studies, as well as in studies that explicate the religious and socio-historical contexts of my particular examples. Additionally, because I analyze these pilgrims’ performance of gender, these pilgrimages’ relationships with history and cultural memory, and the power of pilgrimage as a transformative ritual performance, I also draw on performance studies, feminist theory and gender studies, and ritual studies. The following selected studies have been foundational to my research and analysis in these fields.
Pilgrimage

*Pilgrimage* is a specific type of ritualized religious performance, and Victor Turner’s anthropological work is foundational to ritual studies’ interest in pilgrimage. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Turner points to pilgrimage in particular as a clear example of liminality, through which participants are in a “between-world,” outside of their normal physical location, relationship to time, religious participation, and social identity. As participants are united in “communitas” instead of according to “structure,” Turner suggests, this “interim of ‘liminality’” offers the possibility “of standing aside not only from one’s own position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements” (13–14). Thus, as they critique social structure by performing it differently, participants united by communitas are able to re-form and re-structure society.

In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Turner and Turner suggest that pilgrimages may be classified into four main types, two of which are relevant here. First, “prototypical pilgrimages” (such as those to Jerusalem, Rome, and Mecca) are those that were established by the religion’s founder or an early disciple. Turner and Turner stress that these pilgrimages “dramatically manifest […] the orthodoxy of the faith from which they have sprung” – a suggestion with intriguing implications for my study of women’s “prototypical” but seemingly non-orthodox pilgrimages to Rome (18). Second, “archaic pilgrimages” are those, now associated with a major or orthodox religion, that “bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs” (18). For example, Turner and Turner cite Glastonbury, an Anglican cathedral that nonetheless has “continuing Celtic pagan overtones” (18). Many sites of ancient pagan or goddess worship, overlaid with Christian churches, fit here; however, I suggest that some of these pilgrimages are, for their goddess-seeking participants, *prototypical* instead.
A few, more recent studies of pilgrimage highlight the value of a study such as this one. For example, in her essay “Labyrinth as Heterotopia: The Pilgrim’s Creation of Space,” Lori G. Beaman takes issue with the phrase “religious tourism” as a descriptor for pilgrimage, in that “it implies that there is a holiday, in a sense, from one’s ‘real’ religious life” (87). Although (or perhaps because) pilgrimages are what Foucault calls “heterotopias,” they are, as Beaman makes clear, not “peripheral” to “real” religious or spiritual practices (86). Religious identity is also at play in Sarah Bill Schott’s essay “Pilgrims, Seekers and History Buffs: Identity Creation through Religious Tourism.” She grounds her study of religious tourist sites in the claim that “tourism, especially religious tourism, is important to study because it is identity-creating behavior” (298). Because pilgrims’ religious sight-seeing trips are outside of their daily routines, they provide “opportunity for new religious experiences that challenge the self […] and help define who they are” (298). Beaman and Schott thus offer a way of seeing pilgrimage – despite being peripheral to everyday life – as central to the spiritual identity formation of its participants.

Turning now to my specific examples, I suggest a few of the most important sources. In these areas, an extensive amount of scholarly work is available, as is a wide range of work on pilgrimage and on women’s spirituality. However, primary sources are much more limited, and are drawn largely from firsthand accounts and secondhand descriptions, not theoretical work.

My analysis of contemporary Catholic women’s pilgrimage begins with one such pilgrimage in particular, led to Rome in 2006 and 2007 by FutureChurch. My introduction to this pilgrimage was Margot Patterson’s article in the *National Catholic Reporter* entitled “Finding ‘Herstory’: Pilgrims in Rome Examine Women’s Leadership Roles in the Early Christian Church.” In this brief article, Patterson describes the March 2007 pilgrimage, led by the FutureChurch inter-parish organization, to “the Catacombs of Priscilla” and other “evidence
of women’s leadership roles in early Christianity” (12, 10); she also includes quotations from several of the pilgrims, who offer their own interpretations of their experience. Here, I also draw upon several brief articles and news briefs (written both by pilgrimage leaders and by outside writers), travel brochures, and trip itineraries, as well as a personal conversation with Sister Christine Schenk, FutureChurch’s executive director and the primary pilgrimage leader.

To provide context for this pilgrimage, I also refer to feminist theology and writings about contemporary Catholic feminism, the Women-Church movement, and women’s ordination, and to descriptions of related ritual and liturgical practices as comparative sites of spiritual and gendered identity performance. FutureChurch is connected with other inter-parish organizations that support equality in ordination, including the Women-Church movement, a loosely formed international collection of Catholic, semi-Catholic, and post-Christian women’s spiritual communities. Rosemary Radford Reuther’s 1985 book Women-Church was influential to the movement’s early development, and she returns to the subject in “The Women-Church Movement in Contemporary Christianity.” In this essay, Reuther describes this movement’s tactics, which continue to work both within and outside of Catholicism. For example, Women-Church recognizes the “lay disempowerment” inherent in sacraments that are only infused with power when blessed by ordained (i.e., male) clergy, and so rejects the “practice of clerical hierarchical control” while still embracing “religious symbols [that] represent our ordinary life transformed and restored to its potential for goodness” (201, 202). To this end, Women-Church rituals often maintain their familiar structure while negotiating the symbols, liturgies, and ritual performances in ways that reflect and honor women’s experiences of life and spirituality.

The other feminist theologian whose ideas have been particularly influential is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Her 1984 book In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction
of Christian Origins continues to shape feminist biblical interpretation. In this work, she responds to the text’s patriarchal bias by systematically reinterpreting the New Testament “though the lens of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval with the avowed purpose of restoring women to Christian history and their religious history to Christian women” (Schneiders 35). In it, she suggests that an interpretive framework based on Jesus’ value of equality is “the only one that can do justice to the dynamics of the Jesus movement and the only one that has the power to set free the equalitarian impulses of that movement both in the ancient traditions and in contemporary practices” (Conn 20). In Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation (1993), she rejects the Church’s “kyriarchy” (her term, from kyrios, “lord,” indicates a system based on dominance and submission and includes hierarchy and patriarchy) in favor of a reformed, renewed church based on those equalitarian values. These foundational ideas are played out throughout FutureChurch’s pilgrimage.

For my work on goddess pilgrimage, I primarily draw from firsthand accounts of such pilgrimages. Leila Castle’s Earthwalking Sky Dancers: Women’s Pilgrimages to Sacred Places is a compilation of first-person narrative accounts by goddess-seeking pilgrims, describing their own identity performances and spiritual discoveries through pilgrimage; two of these essays provide the specific examples for my study. In “Red Eggs and Black Olives: A Daughter’s Initiation in Crete,” Tsultrim Allione describes the ritual she performed with her daughter. Through this ritual, explicitly connected to “similar,” Goddess-worshipping ceremonies in the past, Allione and her daughter Aloka used symbolic items to perform their gender and spiritual identities. Jo Carson describes pilgrimage very differently in “Dancing with Gaia and Seeking an Oracle,” a narrative about several of her initial encounters with sacred sites while filming her documentary Dancing with Gaia. Carson recognizes one such encounter as a “pilgrimage”
because it effected a healing transformation in her body (by drawing her into the physical presence of the site) and in her spirit (by connecting her to the sacred site’s ancient Goddess and Goddess worship). By seeing the Maltese “Sleeping Lady” within herself and by seeing herself within the body of the Goddess, Carson’s image of her own self-identity is transformed.

To help me contextualize these journeys, Kathryn Rountree’s essays, in which she analyzes her own participation and leadership of goddess pilgrimage and feminist spirituality, are the most useful sources.³ In half a dozen essays, Rountree offers descriptions and analysis of what she calls “Goddess pilgrimage.” Rountree has participated in a number of widely varied Goddess pilgrimages, as a pilgrim as well as an anthropologist, and her firsthand accounts are foundational to my own description of these pilgrimages and are frequently cited and quoted by other authors writing about pilgrimage and the Goddess. Rountree suggests that the Goddess pilgrim is rather postmodern in her practice, “collecting a plethora of deities, myths, rituals and sacred sites”; nonetheless, she importantly emphasizes, these pilgrims “are deeply serious about their belief in the sacred energy connected with ancient Pagan temple sites” (“Goddess Pilgrims” 478–79). Moreover, she highlights the importance of the “feminine divine” and the participant’s own, female body to the transformation of the pilgrim’s performance of gender identity, suggesting that many pilgrimages and site-based sacred experiences aim to “contribute to a radical re-inscription of the female body by exposing women to alternative representations of the feminine and by providing contexts in which the feminine can be re-imagined, re-experienced and performed differently through symbolic activity and ritual” (Rountree, “Performing” 99).

My understanding of Goddess traditions and worship practices are furthered both by other narrative descriptions and by scholarly, historical, and theological analyses of Goddess

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³ While sources are available from perspectives that are either scholarly and analytical or first-hand and narrative, Rountree is the primary scholar who writes about pilgrimage from a first-person, experiential point of view.
worship. For example, in “Twentieth-Century Women’s Religion as Seen in the Feminist Spirituality Movement,” Cynthia Eller points to the importance of feminist spirituality’s “sacred history”: a version of Western history that argues that prehistorical societies were at least Goddess-worshipping, and perhaps matriarchal as well” (173). I would counter, however, that adherents to feminist spirituality negotiate “belief” in this “sacred history” in many different ways, from literal and concrete to metaphorical and utopic.

**Ritual Studies**

In order to understand pilgrimage’s ability to effect transformation, I draw upon the field of ritual studies. While a discussion of this idea forms the heart of my next chapter, it is useful to give a brief overview here of three authors whose ideas are formative to my own.

First, in *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Religion*, Tom Driver suggests the “modalities” of performance, including the “ritual,” “confessional,” and “ethical” modes. This move is the primary tie between Driver’s thesis writ large and women’s rituals in particular. Driver mentions women’s consciousness-raising groups as one of several clear manifestations of “confessional performance,” those “acts in which people openly proclaim their identity as members of an oppressed group” (116). Such performance is closely linked to the “ethical,” and therefore “of the largest public consequence,” when such rituals “assist human communities struggling to maintain their identity and cast off bonds of oppression” (120). All of this finds fruition in Driver’s final chapter, in which he situates ritual as transformative, even “magical” (i.e., effective), its ability to “disorder and refashion” the status quo (132). This concept of modalities of performance, with its affirmation of the value of identity-forming rituals as a powerful means of liberation and transformation, was a useful place to begin my study.
In his study *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Eric Rothenbuhler defines ritual as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life,” that which the community holds sacred or most important (27). Rothenbuhler also notes that “[r]ituals often occur in the subjunctive mood,” presenting a “version of social order” that is never an accurate description or straightforward reflection of the status quo (15). He suggests that such rituals exist in liminal, between-spaces, which “can produce a great degree of license in social activity and a potential for freedom and creativity in social thought” (16). The “subjunctive” mode is, for me, among the most useful ways of understanding how ritual effects transformation: as participants embody “what could be, might be, or ought to be,” that which “could be” (but is not yet) is brought into existence, made physically present through performance (19).

Rothenbuhler begins his study with a counterpoint to J. L. Austin: ritual is “a way of saying”; that is, ritual is how to say things with actions (53). Rothenbuhler also notes that rituals refer both backward (to the symbolic meaning, not the immediate time or place) and forward (to the “soon-to-be-realized social significance of the ritual”) (63). Importantly, therefore, ritual “is about *both* position in the cosmic order and alignment in a practical world,” allowing participants to order themselves according to two different logics at once (e.g., past and future, “the cosmic and the ordinary,” and individual and community) (64). This fusing of references helps to create the subjunctive mood: by participating in both orders at once, participants are able to create and perform roles in a “still unfolding social situation,” thus uniting those different worlds (64).

Finally, I turn to a book on theatre as a means of tying together performance and ritual, as well as returning to questions of identity performance. It is not uncommon to read variations on the theme “ritual is like theatre,” but relatively rare to encounter books that argue the converse,
that “theatre works like ritual.” *Utopia in Performance* does precisely this. In it, Jill Dolan suggests that utopian moments at the theatre offer temporary communities (i.e., the audience and performers) glimpses of the possibilities for a better world. Performances can provide affective experiences that encourage hope and action. She writes: “Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the ‘what if,’ rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the ‘what should be,’ allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, in process” (13). This runs parallel to Eric Rothenbuhler’s description of ritual as subjunctive, and also ties into Driver’s ideas, in that her utopian moments are often about imagining (and being moved to create) “improved social relations” and political transformation (14).

Dolan also offers a useful answer to the question of “universality.” Using Turner and Habermas, she suggests that “[a]udiences form temporary communities,” but that these groups “are best considered multiple,” because “there can’t be ‘one’ public sphere in which all are included” (10). In this way, a temporary community is built from both diverse individuality and a feeling of “belonging to the group” (11). Perhaps this is how a “community” of women pilgrims can be understood: not *en masse*, united under the universal umbrella of “woman,” but as individuals choosing to come together as an intentional community, much in the same way Diamond describes “strategic essentialism” (qtd. in Carlson 183). Dolan’s study suggests a model for studying such “temporary communities” and their glimpses into a transformed future.

**Women’s Spirituality**

Because my dissertation takes contemporary women’s pilgrimage as its specific site of inquiry, it must reflect my understanding of a wide range of related conversations, both scholarly
and popular. In each chapter, I draw upon studies of women’s spirituality (including feminist theology) and liturgical rituals. These studies explore patterns of worship more broadly, as well as interact with descriptions of, and studies related to, each of my particular examples.

In her essay “Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology,” Carol P. Christ outlined “three main feminist-theological attitudes to the sexism of traditional religions”: Revisionist, Renovationist, and Rejectionist (Stuckey 17). In Feminist Spirituality, Johanna H. Stuckey describes these categories and suggests that a new category, Revolutionary, is also needed. “Revisionists” remain within the (Christian) religious tradition and argue “that correct interpretation will reveal the liberating message at the core of a tradition,” while “Renovationists” work “to expose, and refuse to accept, the parts of a tradition that are sexist” (17). FutureChurch pilgrims generally fit into these first two categories. Stuckey’s addition, “Revolutionary,” takes this response one step further, and advocates “pushing a tradition to its limits,” often by “importing language and imagery from other traditions or from outside tradition” (17). Catholic feminists who are part of such movements as WomenChurch may also fit into this third category. The final category, “Rejectionist,” includes those who “have judged a tradition to be irremediably sexist and usually have left it and set about creating new spiritual traditions” (17). Most pilgrims in search of the goddess fit here, although a significant minority of goddess pilgrims have not left their home church traditions and so remain “Revolutionary.”

Other scholars have proposed similar schema. For example, in her introduction to Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions, Catherine Wessinger points to five categories of marginal religions. Her category of women who “feel excluded from the mainstream of society due to sexism” and choose to “develop separate religious structures” aligns with Stuckey’s third category, and includes Women-Church (6). Her category of groups that “reject the religious
terms of the mainstream society,” including participants in the feminist spirituality movement, is tied to Stuckey’s fourth category (5). Schema such as these can be misleading if they suggest that these spiritual movements can be neatly categorized, since the reality is far messier; they may also be criticized for creating divisions where the participants may be working to overcome such distinctions or work in the space between categories. Nonetheless, they provide a useful starting place for thinking about how such spiritual movements may be compared.

Rita Gross’s *Feminism and Religion* is as a survey of critical questions and issues in this field over the past twenty-five years, and offered an excellent place to begin my work on this topic. In her study of feminist spirituality’s “rereading” of the past (particularly the “creation of patriarchy” hypothesis), Gross carefully negotiates the complexities of goddess-worshippers’ theories about ancient matriarchal societies, identifying these theories’ weaknesses as well as their elements of strength (151, 159). Gross concludes with “feminist visions for going forward” into what she calls “postpatriarchal religion” (198). Her final answers are hope-filled, suggesting that feminist emphasis on appreciating women’s experiences and on naming reality differently may transform patriarchy. Importantly, she suggests that this transformation will be effected through such means as ritual practices, inclusive language, the Women-Church and Feminist Spirituality movements, cross-cultural goddess imagery, and practices of embodiment (198).

Lesley Northup’s *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality* also offers an overview of women’s spiritual practices, particularly within a contemporary and largely American setting. She offers definitions of “women’s ritualizing,” and teases out connections and conflicts between such ritualizing and liturgy, existing religions, emerging spiritual practices, and politics. Northup’s cogent analysis is woven throughout the text, as she grapples with many of the thorny, and often ignored, questions that arise around women’s rituals. For example, she acknowledges
that women’s ritualizing is often conflated with feminism (as if all ritualizing women were feminists), and highlights the difference as well as the overlap between these two groups.

Northup also addresses the difficulties inherent in speaking about “women’s” ritualizing as a category or genre: on the one hand, “today’s women’s groups display a degree of intentionality that highlights those elements that arise out of their gendered experience,” while on the other hand, “in this postmodern era, many would argue against the making of any universal claims for women’s experience, including women’s worship” (3). She concludes that “women’s ritualizing comprises, in its very nature, a political activity that seeks variously to redress grievances, alleviate suffering, overturn inequity, and elevate the position of women” (103).

Finally, in her concluding chapter, Northup addresses those questions that most directly challenge the validity of her field of study (for example, is women’s ritualizing “a distinctive category”?) and, while acknowledging such difficulties, concludes that “women’s ritualizing appears to be a legitimate and promising area of study” (108, 113). Northup’s study has been useful, therefore, as an overview of the topic and as a model of acknowledging and debating theoretical challenges without allowing the subject to dissolve into the unknowable.

Susan A. Ross turns her attention to “women’s ritualizing” as it is tied specifically to church sacraments. Her study, Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology, both offers examples of how ritual, theology, and gender are intertwined, and illustrates how women’s performance of gender and spiritual identity through ritual can transform faith practices. Ross’s example (sacramental theology) runs parallel with my own (ritual pilgrimage) in at least three useful ways. First, it is shaped by a feminist perspective. Ross suggests that “women have turned to ‘unofficial’ [or ‘unorthodox’] religious practices,” in large part because feminist theology, as “a theology of liberation,” is interested in the “emancipatory potential” of spiritual
practices (27). Next, it depends upon shifts in interpretation of history and orthodoxy, or what Ross calls *ambiguity*, as “a source of transformation and meaning” (65). Particularly as informed by the ways in which “[p]ostmodernism has come to embrace ambiguity in its rejection of sure and absolute foundations for human knowledge,” Ross suggests, “the ambiguities surrounding […] women’s relation to the sacraments, can prove to be critical and transformative resources” (65). Finally, Ross considers how “women’s practice of worship in relation to community and church [is] already redefining what we mean by the sacraments” (209). That is, *transformation* is the expected and recognized result of women’s unorthodox, ritualized religious practices.

**Performance of Identity (Performance Studies and Gender Studies)**

Performance Studies and Gender Studies meet at the moment when a woman’s gendered, physical body begins to perform. Although gender and performance has developed into a significant field of study, analyses of the female body’s performance of identity have been limited, by and large, to studies of stage performance. Therefore, I apply questions of how the gendered body “stages” her identity to a very different kind of performance, one that will, I hope, inform and expand other conversations within performance studies. Building on what feminist performance art has revealed regarding this intersection as a fruitful space for the performance of identity, I am seeking to expand this conversation by exploring non-theatrical sites where the ritualized, physical performance of the particularly female body is central to the transformative power of the ritual. Thus, performance studies and gender studies are inextricably linked throughout my work. They are also tied together in the theories I claim as foundational; writers such as Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous also work at the intersections of these fields.
In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler analyzes the performativity of gender, and highlights the significance of the “distinction between expression and performativeness” of gender attributes. That is, whereas an “expression” of gender would depend upon a “preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured,” understanding gender attributes as *performatived* insists that there is “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity [is] revealed s a regulatory fiction” (192). Therefore, for Butler, no gender identity is performed *wrong*. In my study of the performance of identity by women at the margins, even of their own faith practices, Butler has helped me think about how performances of self (including gender and spiritual identity) can be subversive and yet not distorted.

Similarly, in *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson examines ways in which performance can disrupt and distort the dominant order. Many of his examples are feminist performers who “seek out some strategy suggested by de Certeau’s ‘tactics’” in order to “resist, challenge, or even subvert [dominant] codes … ‘from within’” (172). Such strategies often involve negotiating the tension between wanting to undermine essentializing constructions and yet needing a ground from which to take political action. In answer, Carlson turns to Elin Diamond: such “[i]ntervention in the operations of the dominant symbolic systems […] seems to require […] ‘assuming a subject position, however provisional, and making truth claims, however flexible, concerning one’s own representations’” – that is, “strategic essentialism” (182–83). For Carlson, postmodernism lends itself well to this strategy, allowing performers both to claim an identity position and to comment ironically upon that identity. In this work, I explore the “tactics” through which pilgrims similarly subvert the social order.

In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case also works at the intersection of these two fields. I am particularly interested in Case’s insistence that a study of *women’s* performance will
necessarily “differ substantially” from typical (i.e., masculine) theatre history (28). To that end, she expands her definition of theatre to include domestic, personal, and non-textual modes of performances. For example, within the salon, “personal dialogue is created by partners in production rather than by [an] audience,” “is built on mutuality and intersubjectivity,” and “operates not by mimesis but by enactment” – descriptions equally applicable to the meaning-making I study (46). Case also touches on feminist spirituality, describing several rituals enacted by witches and explaining that “[t]he feminist witch creates a new tradition of women’s performances as well as a tie to the history of such performances. These rituals empower the women who participate in them and reverse a central negative image of women into a positive one” (75). To include such examples within a book on “theatre” was a radical gesture on Case’s part, challenging canonical definitions of theatre while generously opening the field of “theatre studies” to its “future possibilities,” including all modes of performance by women.

Other works, less focused on gender, are nonetheless important contributions to an analysis of the performance of any markers of identity. In The Archive and the Repertoire, Diana Taylor works to explore how “expressive behavior (performance) transmit[s] cultural memory and identity” (xvi). Particularly useful is her emphasis on the specific bodies engaged in performance: “it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied. […] Gender impacts how these bodies participate, as does ethnicity” (86). Taylor’s insistence on the specificity of performing bodies has helped to keep me grounded in a study of performance even as I dive into other fields of research. To that end, Taylor legitimizes her study (and, by extension, my own) through the claim that the performances of “the repertoire,” such as “movement, dance, [and] singing,” are valid and important sources of information (20). As it
has highlighted the value of embodied performance as a means of transmitting “cultural memory and identity,” Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertorie* has been a useful framework for research.

Within this exploration of gender, identity, and performance, I find it useful to mention another type of performance – women’s writing – as an example that runs parallel to women’s ritualizing. That is, I believe, women’s autobiographical writing promises a useful entry into the study of identity self-construction, and Hélène Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” is foundational to that field of study. Cixous describes woman “writing her self,” but this writing can be understood both literally (on the page, and in speech) and metaphorically (on the body) (2043). She suggests that because women’s role in history and society has always been based “*on her suppression*” and her silence, a “feminine practice of writing” can be “conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate,” and so “cannot fail to be more than subversive” (2044, 2046, 2051). Similarly, she promises that when women – from their places on the margins – write with, on, and through their bodies instead of attempting to work within the very (masculine) codes which “negate” women’s existence, they will be liberated from those systems (2043). Similarly, women’s pilgrimage is able to subvert and upset the authorities that would silence it and to act as a performance of challenge, *because of* (not *in spite of*) its place on the periphery of religious performance.

Clearly, the specifically *female* body is central to my research. Nonetheless, I am aware of the ways in which such gendered terminology may reflect a seemingly essentialist idea of what a “woman” is. While claims to “the female body,” “femininity,” and “the goddess” are undeniably important to the work done by the pilgrims I study, I acknowledge at least three ways in which that gender-specific identity is both limited and fluid.
First, the identity “woman” is claimed, in explicit and implicit ways, by the participants I have studied. That is, those women self-identify in this way, and I have not sought to question or legitimate that marker of self-identification. Certainly, some men have traveled on both of the types of pilgrimages under consideration, although in far smaller number than women.\footnote{Incidentally, many of the men who have been part of these pilgrimages (specifically the Catholic examples) are and were priests – whose gender role is contestable in that they claim their status by not associating with women in intimate or partnered ways. That is, according to some theologians and feminist scholars, priests and nuns achieve their higher role in the church by renouncing their gendered sexuality. However, because I have neither studied such men nor challenged the self-identified gender of such women, I leave this point for others to tease out.} However, both because of the nature of my study and because of the limitations of information available on the role of men in women-centered ritual, I have focused on the women pilgrims.

Second, “women” as a category of persons, while claimed by many who write on women’s rituals, spirituality, and theology, is simultaneously challenged by those same scholars. Such women, scholars and pilgrims alike, negotiate the tension between the need for the category of “woman” and the need to destabilize or reshape that category. I am particularly intrigued by a note in Butler’s 1999 preface to Gender Trouble. Here, she acknowledges that although she originally “conceive[d] of the claim of ‘universality’ in exclusive negative and exclusionary terms,” she has since seen the important strategic use of such claims (xviii). Butler writes: “I came to understand how the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met” (xviii). This acknowledgement invites me to explore the tension that is held in play, creatively and defiantly, by women who perform both as, and in contestation of, “Woman.” To that end, Butler’s strategic universality, or what Diamond calls “strategic essentialism,” is a useful tactic in my own work as well (qtd. in Carlson 183).

Third, in my study I have been less interested in the ways in which pilgrimage solidifies the definition of “women” than in the ways in which it transforms the meaning of that identity.
marker. That is, the transformative nature of ritual means, I believe, that these pilgrimages can be important in changing, in the minds and lives of the participants, what it means to be a woman. Typically, this works by way of changing the pilgrims’ relationship with patriarchal hegemony (e.g., shifting their understanding of the legitimate role of women in the church). I also find it worthwhile to mention that many of these rituals and pilgrimages are also focused on the literal, physical transformations of the female body-in-process. For example, many women-centered rituals (in both Christian and goddess spirituality) celebrate the transforming arrival of menstruation or menopause, mark the transition between girlhood and womanhood, or acknowledge shifts in gender-role and -identity such as birth, miscarriage, abortion, and divorce. Other Christian ritualists have written about the importance of baptizing girls as girls (not as sexless creatures) to the church and to a life that will be marked by their gender and sexuality.

In all of these ways, female pilgrims, theologians, and scholars strategically claim “woman” as an essentialized category, only to challenge and transform what it means to be a part of that category. Similarly, I both write about pilgrims “as women” and also interrogate how the meaning of “woman” is claimed, shifted, re-imagined, and transformed through pilgrimage.

MY POSITION WITHIN THIS STUDY

My own position within this study is perhaps best described as an “informed outsider.” Due to my Protestant and feminist background, I am familiar with modern and contemporary religious practices, and am sympathetic to the desire to bring one’s spiritual and gender identities into harmony and to perform those identities in meaningful, transformative ways. I am also particularly interested in the efficacy and importance of ritual. However, I am an outsider to both Catholicism and goddess worship, and so have sought to dialogue with the pilgrims and
pilgrimages of such traditions in ways that are, in Dwight Conquergood’s term, “dialogic.” Nonetheless, in that I have approached the subject as a scholar, a certain amount of skepticism has allowed me to interrogate what is “really” being done by rituals and pilgrimages, even as I focused primarily on what the pilgrims themselves believe or claim is being done.

I am also an outsider in that I have never been on a formal pilgrimage. While I hope that my future work on this subject may be done as a participant-observer, participation or formal interviews have not been part of my research for this project. Because the vast majority of resources on women’s pilgrimage (and especially on goddess pilgrimage) are the first-person accounts of long-time participants, I feel that my own firsthand description would have little to add to that of such “experts.” Moreover, in that there has been little scholarly analysis of contemporary women’s pilgrimage, I believe that this research may begin to fill in that gap.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

In this dissertation, I focus on women’s pilgrimages as a means of exploring and analyzing how ritual participants perform their identity, how performances of gender and spiritual identity are intertwined, and how ritual allows for those performances of identity to be created, shifted, and transformed. To that end, I work through these questions in relation to specific examples of two very different types of contemporary women’s spiritual pilgrimage.

Following this first chapter, which serves as an introduction, I focus on the performative and transformative power of ritual in chapter two. Here, I expand upon my preceding discussion of ritual studies, exploring the nuances of the theories upon which I build my hypothesis. I also suggest that ritual and pilgrimage allow for a transformative performance of self.
Chapter three begins my in-depth exploration of particular examples of women’s pilgrimage. In this chapter, I outline a brief history of Catholic feminist spirituality and its leading voices, and summarize FutureChurch’s relationship with affiliated movements such as Women-Church, the Church tension over the question of ordaining women, and the importance and practice of liturgical rituals to many contemporary Catholic and Women-Church worshipers. I then draw attention to those ideological principles and goals that are most pertinent to my study of the related pilgrimage. This information provides the context for the next chapter.

In chapter four, I turn specifically to FutureChurch’s pilgrimage to sites in Rome that suggest the importance of women to the early Christian church. Here, I work to analyze how these pilgrims create and perform a hotly contested gender and spiritual identity, and how their pilgrimage performance, carefully situated within ancient church practice, theology, tradition, and even physical site, works to mark these identity performances as “orthodox.” Finally, I ask how these performances may shape the participants’ gender-role expectations tied to ordination and leadership, and how their personal transformations may affect the Catholic Church itself.

In chapter five, I move away from “orthodox” Western religion and turn to Goddess pilgrimage – a religious movement that seeks to legitimate not only its expectation of gender roles but its very existence as a spiritual practice. Here again, I offer a concise account of the movement’s theology, and overview the types of sites that are considered sacred and the repertoiric performances that are typical among goddess-seeking pilgrims. In this chapter, I bring together a wide range of sources, many of which are first-hand but partial. Women’s pilgrimage narratives are usually limited to small-press publications and “niche” journals, and therefore must be brought into the scholarly conversation before they can be studied by others.
In chapter six, I describe two specific goddess-oriented pilgrimage practices; because this movement’s practices are marked by plurality, it is useful to draw from multiple examples instead of focusing on any one pilgrimage in particular. Once again, I explore how these pilgrims create and perform identities that may challenge traditional expectations of gender and spirituality. Moreover, I analyze the use of pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites (locations that are tied to historical – but unknown – religious practices) as ways of legitimizing identity performance by grounding it in continuity with the ancient past. I also consider the use of repertoiric performance to challenge archaeologists’ archive-based, authoritative interpretation about these sacred sites. Finally, I ask how these ritual performances seek to transform the expectations and structures of patriarchal society, especially as related to gender and spirituality.

The final chapter of my dissertation serves as a conclusion to my study. Here, I explore the ways in which these examples have illustrated the performance of gender and spiritual identity, the importance of “orthodoxy” as a means of legitimizing these performances, and the value of ritual as a way of transforming identity through performance.

Through my research, I have come to believe that gender and spirituality are inextricably linked, that ritual has transformative effects, and that both identity and ritual are performative, creating meaning through embodiment. This work brings together the fields of gender studies and theology in ways rarely seen outside of the growing field of women’s liturgy and ritual, and thus contributes to other important new work in women’s spirituality. Moreover, it also builds on performance and ritual studies; thus, my final task is to bring women’s spirituality into the wide range of areas studied in terms of performance. To demonstrate the ways in which these four fields – studies of gender, spirituality, performance, and ritual – can work together, I argue
that the work of pilgrimage is a cultural performance that both claims and re-sees (or even rewrites) religious history and orthodoxy as a means of legitimizing its pilgrims’ transformed gender and spiritual identities.

Throughout this study, I make three primary claims about performance. First, pilgrims perform their identity – their beliefs about themselves and their role in society and religion – in ways that reflect both gender and spirituality. Because both of these attributes are currently in flux (i.e., questions about the appropriateness or legitimacy of gender roles, spiritual beliefs and theology, and the explicit intersection of the two, as in the role of women in the church), pilgrims are able to perform their identity in ways which are non-traditional or unorthodox. However, according to Butler, these alternative identity performances constitute the pilgrims’ identities; they do not reflect already-existing or inherent identities and so cannot be judged “true” or “false.” Second, these pilgrimages are intentionally situated within church tradition, historical spiritual heritage, and religious cultural memory. However, the history and cultural memory to which these pilgrims appeal is often erased, forgotten, or contested by other “authorities”; therefore, pilgrims often reject or challenge the authority of the archive and use repertoiric performances – which Taylor sees as a valuable “way of knowing” – in order to mark their identity performances as “legitimate” or “also orthodox.” Finally, these pilgrims use many forms of ritual in order to constitute their identity, to re-interpret the archive and reclaim the repertoire, and to connect to and re-member (that is, to give body to, again, or to remember through performance) their spiritual ancestors. These rituals work in what Driver calls “transformative” ways, including embodying the ideal and bringing the future into the present. Therefore, these rituals, as well as performances in the confessional and ethical modes, are ideal tactics through which pilgrims can seek healing and work towards transformation.
CHAPTER TWO. PILGRIMAGE IS PERFORMATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE

In the four chapters that follow, I explore specific pilgrimages and suggest that they reveal instances of ritual transformation. This claim draws heavily upon the work of several philosophers and ritualists, including J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Victor Turner, and Tom Driver. Therefore, before I begin analyzing the performances of identity that are specific to individual pilgrimages, I will begin here with a discussion of what ritual is and of its defining characteristics. Then, I explore ritual’s power to effect change and make room for new performances of identity, beginning with the linguistic term “performative.” Although Austin coined this term to name a certain type of language, Derrida and Butler have revealed the citational – that is, in effect, the ritual – ramifications of this category. Thus, in the hands of Butler and Derrida, Austin’s theory of performative language is applied to performative action – ritual – revealing one way through which ritual creates change. From this point, I turn to ritual theory, discussing the “transformative” power of ritual and three types of ritual that illustrate this power. With this in place, two important features of ritual will become clear: that it is paradoxical, not logical, and that its powers of “transformation” are not necessarily sudden reversals, but can also be thought of as “becoming,” creating the changes that make true, long-term transformation possible. This complex understanding of pilgrimage as a ritual, a ritual that can perform the ideal and the “is-not” because it works through its own paradoxical logic, reveals that pilgrimage can “break the rules” of the performative, and transform without the “authority” that established “orthodoxy” – or even Austin – claims to be necessary.

It is important to begin with a foundation in ritual theory because pilgrimage is, involves, and works through ritual. Pilgrimage itself is a ritual, echoing centuries of religious practice.
Although it has taken many forms, the essential elements (a journey and a sacred site) remain constant. It is also common practice for pilgrims to engage in other rituals during the journey to, or upon arriving at, the site. These rituals may be specific to a site (e.g., sleeping in St. Patrick’s Purgatory in Ireland), common among many pilgrimage sites (e.g., climbing a hill on one’s knees), or a familiar part of worship at home (e.g., celebrating Mass or completing the Stations of the Cross). As with other rituals, they may be formal or informal, and performed individually or as a group. Thus, both through the ritual journey itself and the other rituals performed in conjunction, pilgrimage is infused with the performative, transformative power of ritual.

DEFINITION OF RITUAL

It is hardly an overstatement to suggest that there is “the widest possible disagreement as to how the word ritual should be understood” (Leach, qtd. in Bell v). Most scholars define the term in a way that highlights their specific interests, and I am sure my definition is guilty of the same bias. Nonetheless, a few elements of ritual are common among most, if not all, definitions.

First, perhaps the simplest definition of rituals is that they are *performances of belief, performed for an audience*. This alone requires three elements: a belief, a performance, and an audience. Although ritual theorists have often suggested that rituals are a physical expression of a preexisting belief or idea, Catherine Bell has critiqued these theories, “seeing them as rooted in a dichotomy of thought and action,” mind and body, or theory and practice (Berry). In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell observes that ritual “has long been understood as a way of ‘acting out’ what is believed, or as the ‘practical’ or embodied dimension of a religious belief system. Such a dichotomy (ritual = practice; belief = thought), she contends, is both a product of, as well as the means to perpetuate, the very dichotomies that it is claiming to resolve (mind/body,
belief/action)” (Ross 223). Although the distinction may seem slight, it is vital: rituals do not “give form to” ideas or beliefs; instead, ritualizing is the “strategic action” through which performers constitute belief. As Butler puts it, “[t]he distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial” (192). For her, gender acts are performatives, not the expression of some “preexisting identity”; if there were, then these acts and attributes could be identified as “true or false, real or distorted” (192). Similarly, for Bell, rituals are not a physical expression of a belief, but a performance through which that belief is constituted. Thus, rituals cannot be measured as a “true or false” embodiment of belief.

Additionally, the physical, performed nature of ritual is inescapable; while rituals are related to ideas and beliefs, the ideas themselves are not rituals. Instead, rituals, performed by human bodies, are performatives of those beliefs and ideas. Often, ritual acts are “expressions of commitment” – to a god or religion, a social or ethnic community, a cultural expectation of behavior, a nation, or any other series of beliefs (De Vos, qtd. in Leeds-Hurwitz 101). Moreover, this performance is done for an audience; as Rothenbuhler notes, “the performative nature of ritual implies two interdependent characteristics. Ritual is a performance of something, for someone” (9). This audience may be the community; God, Goddess, or other divine beings; and/or the participants themselves. In this way, a wedding ritual involves more than just speaking vows; the physical action may include joining hands, exchanging rings, kissing, and signing a legal certificate. All of this may be an enactment of belief in the importance of love and commitment, performed for the couple (so that they “become one flesh”), the observing community (who will then recognize the marriage and support the couple’s commitment), the government (which will now grant certain legal rights), and God (who may
help and reward the faithful couple).\(^1\) Similarly, a pilgrimage, sparked by belief in the sacred importance of a distant site, may involve travel, exploring the site, touching a holy rock or spring, resting in a special cave, praying, sharing the Eucharist or a meal with fellow pilgrims, leaving a flower or other token of gratitude, and interacting with local residents. These actions may be performed for the pilgrim herself (in hopes of becoming healed or holy, or experiencing some other transformation), the divine spirit who is affiliated with the site (who may be pleased with the pilgrim’s faithfulness and grant the desired transformation), or the fellow travelers (who may be observing or following along). Clearly, rituals cannot be solely recreational (despite the enjoyment the pilgrim gets from her travels) nor individualistic (no matter how much the bride insists that this is “her special day”). Even prayer, which may be conducted individually and without a visible audience, typically follows some patterns and is performed for the divine receiver. Instead, rituals are physical, bodily enactments of belief performed for an audience.

Rituals also **regard the sacred.** The beliefs that inspire or undergird the ritual are always deeply held, and often considered “holy” in a religious sense. In such cases, participants often see rituals as having “some transformational or confirmatory agency,” a power derived “from an overarching para-human authority, such as a deity” (Santino 126). For example, it is pilgrimage’s sacred site and its link to a divine presence that afford it such transformational power. However, the term “sacred” also includes that which is set apart, consecrated, inviolable, or taken most seriously. Thus, “in any given cultural community, the sacred is whatever is treated as unquestionable, ‘beyond interdiction,’ as Durkheim puts it, as of the utmost seriousness by members of that community” (Rothenbuhler 24). Besides religious beliefs, “the sacred” may also include patriotism, gender roles, class or caste divisions, and protection of the

\(^1\) A wedding “event,” on the other hand, may be mostly for the mother of the bride, who has been secretly planning the day for twenty-some years, and the couple’s friends, who are happy for an excuse to dance and celebrate. Thus, there may (or may not) be a distinguishable difference between the sacred ritual and the wider context or event.
young or respect for elders, as well as etiquette and “manners.” Rothenbuhler suggests that “ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (27). Weddings, for example, are ritualized largely because of beliefs that marriage itself is sacred (or even a sacrament) or that transfer of property and paternity of the couple’s children must be unquestionable. Pilgrimage reflects beliefs that certain sites are holy or set apart, and may convey certain benefits upon the faithful pilgrim. In all cases, rituals communicate, enact, or otherwise engage with deeply held, inviolable beliefs.

Finally, rituals operate according to standardized forms and symbolic meanings. Some rituals are highly formal, and may seem to be exactly the same every time, such as high Mass or swearing an oath of citizenship. Others may be improvised or seem to be invented almost completely “from scratch,” including rituals that have no “official” form (such as celebrations of first menstruation) or ones that are personalized or adjusted for atypical circumstances (such as many contemporary weddings). Nonetheless, in all rituals, the basic forms or elements are pre-existing, although they may be modified, combined, restructured in new ways, or borrowed from different types of rituals. “Rituals are forms of customary behavior[…] There is always something about ritual that is stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant, formal. This implies that ritual is repetitive in the sense that others have done it this way before” (Rothenbuhler 20). In fact, because rituals are performed for audiences, they are only recognizable as such, and therefore meaningful, because of their standardized form or context. Therefore, because meaning is created and made clear through physical action and a form that is understandable to the audience, ritual is free to work through symbols instead of concrete or literal meaning. Indeed, “ritual works by a logic of signs, meanings, and morals that is distinct from the logic of technical rationality” – that is, it creates meaning and effects transformation in

\[2\] However, no matter how standardized a ritual’s form may be, it is always individual and “new” in some way.
ways that are more symbolic or indirect than rationally logical (Rothenbuhler 11-12). For example, although pilgrimages may follow highly standardized forms or be more loosely structured, pilgrims base their behavior on existing forms in some way: prayer or invocation, touching the site, and expressing gratitude are common to a wide variety of pilgrimages across many religious practices. Many pilgrims also attempt to structure their behavior according to a historical model (i.e., echoing the practices of the martyred saint or the temple’s ancient priestesses) or a practice that is customary among the pilgrim’s community or religion (e.g., standing in a circle or saying Mass). All of these practices are meaningful not because of some inherent logic, but because they are recognizable patterns of behavior with symbolic meanings.

Thus, pilgrimages, along with all other rituals, are physical actions and bodily performances. They are grounded in a deeply held belief about that which is considered sacred, and perform, give shape to, or enact that belief for an audience – although that audience is often Goddess or God, or the pilgrim herself. They may be highly formalized, utterly unique, or a combination of established behaviors and invented ones, but nonetheless originate in some sort of standardized form or customary practice; it is often this element of custom or standardization that gives meaning to symbols and symbolic actions.

RITUALS ARE PERFORMATIVE

Because they are symbolic, formalized, concerned with what is sacred, and performed for an audience, rituals are in some way set apart from everyday life.\(^3\) That is, “what distinguishes

\(^3\) Certainly, there are some ritualists who have expanded their definition of ritual to include such everyday behaviors as brushing one’s teeth. Many everyday rituals, such as handshakes, can still fit under the given rubric: handshakes are physical enactments of a deeply held belief in politeness, equality, or friendship; are performed by the participants for each other and, in some cases, for onlookers; and are highly formalized and symbolic (despite being relatively naturalized). However, habitual actions such as teeth-brushing fall outside my definition (as they do for most, but not all, ritualists) because, while physical actions, they are not usually symbolic performances for an audience. The line gets muddied for some at actions such as applying makeup, which may be an important
ritual from ordinary behavior is the way in which its form signifies meaning beyond the behavior itself” (Rothenbuhler 54). By “signifying meaning beyond itself,” ritual can effect transformation or create change. For example, boys’ initiation rites in many indigenous cultures do not just signify the “behavior itself” – that the boy is painted, tattooed, or sent outside the town – but also signifies something beyond this literal meaning: that the initiate is no longer a boy, but a man. This transformation can be understood, in linguistic terminology, as “performative”: the ritual does not just communicate its literal meaning; instead, it does what it says.

The term “performative” was coined by J. L. Austin. In his development of what is known as Speech-Act Theory, Austin recognized that certain types of utterances were not referential, but active – instead of communicating a fact, they did something, and created what they spoke: “if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is doing something rather than merely saying something” (Austin 1432). He insisted that such performatives were not true or false, but felicitous or infelicitous, and that they must be “serious,” part of “ordinary” language, not “citational” (as in a play). As one of many theorists to interact with Austin’s theory, Jacques Derrida refutes this distinction by revealing that all performative utterances are citational; it is the source, not the revocation, of their power because they work in a context of repeated convention. That is, performatives (like rituals) make their meaning by referring to an established form. The force of “stylized repetition of acts” is especially important for Judith Butler (191). For her, the meaning under question is that of gender identity, and Austin’s notion of meaning made through repetition of a codified speech/act translates to an understanding of performance a woman enacts for herself to symbolize and reinforce her belief in beauty or professionalism. Nonetheless, because pilgrimage is already set apart from everyday life, the rituals encountered in this study will be in some way more formalized or symbolic than these habitual actions. However, this is not to say that “everyday” events cannot be sacred or ritualized; indeed, much of feminist ritualizing works to break down dualisms such as “sacred / profane,” and many such rituals incorporate and sacralize everyday items (e.g. bread and water) or events (e.g. eating, telling stories, menstruating).
gender as created through such formulaic repetition. Thus, ritual can be understood in terms of “the performative,” in that it is a repeated act that creates meaning or effects change by following a convention that “must exist and be accepted” (Austin 1433) – that is, through its formalized, contextualized, citational, symbolic, audience-understood physical action.

**Austin’s “Performative Utterances”**

Frustrated by grammarians’ and philosophers’ positivist insistence that the only worthwhile utterances were ones that could be clearly defined as true or false, J. L. Austin set out to describe and discuss one particular use of language, the performative utterance. To make his case, Austin first gives examples of such utterances, then qualifies what circumstances might make the speech-action “misfire” and be void. In part II, he gets into the muddy waters, trying to distinguish between performative utterances and other declarative utterances and revealing similar infelicities possible in declarative utterances. His conclusion – a useful reminder for ritualists frustrated with the same quandary – is that “it is complicated a bit” (1442).

To begin, Austin examines “a kind of utterance which looks like a statement […] and yet is not true or false” (1431). What sets these utterances apart is the way in which “if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something” (1432). For example, marrying, christening, betting, apologizing, bequeathing, and so on are all actually *done* (or *enacted* or *performed*) by the words themselves.

Thus, ritual is “performative,” in line with Austin’s term, in that it creates what it names. A coming-of-age ceremony does not just celebrate a child’s transition into adulthood; working outside of rational logic, it *creates* and *brings into existence* an adult man or woman. The Catholic celebration of Mass is an important ritual not because it honors the body of Christ, but,
through ritual, it *transforms* the bread and brings the literal body of Christ *into existence*. The same is true of Austin’s performatives, which “do not refer to an existing state of affairs but which, instead, bring a state of affairs into existence by being uttered” (“J. L. Austin” 1429). Moreover, it is useful to note that many of Austin’s examples of “performative utterances” (some would say *all* of them) *function within rituals* such as marriages and christenings.

Instead of labeling performative utterances “true or false,” he distinguishes them as “felicitous or infelicitous” (1439). An infelicitous performative utterance is not *false*, because it cannot be categorized as such; instead, it *doesn’t work*. It fails, or is unhappy or broken or void, for one or more reasons. For example, the circumstances must be appropriate, and the procedure being carried through correctly. Four other conditions will be examined more closely, because they are particularly important to the connection between pilgrimage and the performative.

First, and most elemental among Austin’s caveats, “it is obvious that” a performative utterance may only succeed if “the conventional procedure which by our utterance we are purporting to use must actually exist” and be appropriate for the situation, within the context at hand (1433). That is, performative utterances only work *within an existing ritual context*. Austin himself seems aware of this, and notes it tangentially: “In the examples given here this procedure will be a verbal one, a verbal procedure for marrying or giving or whatever it may be; but it should be borne in mind that there are many non-verbal procedures by which we can perform exactly the same acts as we perform by these verbal means”; those “non-verbal procedures” are rituals (1433). Similarly, ritualist Ronald Grimes notes that “some of the examples used by Austin are ritualistic, and ritual contexts, more than any other, make use of what he calls ‘performative utterance’” (283). Thus, although Austin’s focus is on a linguistic

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4 In his essay, Grimes organized Austin’s categories of infelicity and applied them to ritual contexts. He suggested that “Not all of Austin’s examples depend solely on language-related features […]. In fact, examined carefully, only
category, he recognizes that speech-acts can only succeed within the “conventional procedure” of ritual. Indeed, marriages, christenings, and coronations are all “felicitous” not only because of the words that are spoken, but because of the ritual context in which those words have meaning.

Second, the performative’s success depends upon the performers having the appropriate authority. Austin recognizes that performative utterances succeed only when they meet the necessary (or “orthodox”) conditions, context, and “conventions.” Among these conventions is authority to perform the act, which may be institutional, legal, or otherwise formalized. Thus, “Performative speech acts such as a judge’s sentencing of a criminal or a minister’s ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ succeed only when uttered by a person with the appropriate authority” (“J. L. Austin” 1429). A ritual performed by a person with no authority – as when the choirmaster, not the priest, performs the wedding – “misfires” and is therefore void. “When a ritual misfires, its formula is not effective; the act is ‘purported but void’” (Grimes 284). Without the appropriate authority, Austin insists, the performative is void, misfires, and fails.

Third, although the idea is almost parenthetical, Austin notes that the performativity of a speech-act cannot be defined by the “inward spiritual act” with which it correlates or contrasts (1432). That is, a man may promise to do something, and whether or not he really means it, he has performed the promise. It is important for Austin not to “slip into thinking that such utterances are reports, true or false, of the performance of inward and spiritual acts,” largely because he is contrasting performative utterances with true/false descriptive utterances (1433). Thus, man may make wedding vows with or without an “inward spiritual act”; the marriage is equally valid in either case. However, Austin notes that in the case of such “insincerity,” the performative act – although literally successful – has been “abused.” “When a rite is abused, it is

‘breaches’ necessarily involve words. In all the other categories failure could occur without the involvement of language at all […]. His categories are more general than one might initially suppose” (285).
‘professed but hollow.’ And abuse would be saying ‘I do’ while secretly resolving not to” (Grimes 284). Similarly, just as with Austin’s performatives, a pilgrimage completed without “inner feeling” has still been completed; however, this “insincerity” makes the ritual hollow, void, and unable to transform the pilgrim. In Austin’s example, a man who marries but has no intention to keep his vows or care for his wife is – although still married – abusing the ritual and unable to experience the inner transformation that makes him into an effective husband. In the same way, a pilgrim is only likely to experience an inner change if she performs the pilgrimage’s inner and outer acts. This “felicitous” but insincere, and therefore ineffective, pilgrimage is perhaps best epitomized by the habit in the middle ages of sending criminals on long pilgrimages to places as far away as the Holy Land; formulated as “penance,” these sentences were intended to get the offender out of town for a few years (and, with any luck, permanently, since such long pilgrimages were dangerous business and pilgrims often died along the way).

Finally, to complete his description, Austin offers the “general over-riding consideration” that performative utterances must be given seriously and not under duress, to which he adds the caveat that if utterances are issued “insincerely,” in a play or joke or poem, it can be understood that the act has not been seriously performed. By reminding the reader that the performative is only effective if it is “seriously meant,” Austin’s logic is that the performative utterance cannot be judged as a true/false report of the condition of the mind or the circumstances, but that those circumstances of spirit and context contribute to the utterance’s felicity or infelicity. In this vein, Austin continues on the subject of the non-serious performative in his Second Lecture:

a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy.... Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not
seriously … but in ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways that fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances. (qtd. in and italicized by Derrida 102)

Thus, Austin limits his study of performative utterances to those “issued in ordinary circumstances,” as opposed to the “parasitic” usage of the stage.

The tension between this idea and the need for an existing, “conventional procedure” is ambiguous, and it is here that Derrida jumps into the discussion. Austin’s exclusion of the “parasitic” use of words seems to dismiss or ignore his own recognition that felicitous speech-acts necessarily cite a “conventional procedure.”

**Derrida’s Response**

Jacques Derrida responded to Austin’s theory in “Signature Event Context,” an address to the Association of French Speaking Societies of Philosophy in 1972. In this essay, Derrida addresses “the problematic of the performative” (97). While recognizing the importance of Austin’s work, Derrida confronts the limit against the “parasitic,” citational performative. For him, Austin’s recognition of potential success or failure puts under question “the possibility that every performative utterance (and a priori every other utterance) may be ‘cited.’ Now, Austin […] insists upon the fact that this possibility remains abnormal, parasitical, that it constitutes a kind of extenuation, that is, an agony of language that must firmly be kept at a distance,” excluded from “ordinary language” (102). However, “ordinary language” is, for Derrida, always citational; the “structure of locution […] already bears within itself the system of predicates that I call graphematic in general,” a system based in trace and difference, in which meaning is made
through relationship to other, previous meaning (99). Derrida takes issue with Austin because he discards this structure as parasitic, non-ordinary: Austin’s work “consists in recognizing that the possibility of the negative (here, the *infelicities*) is certainly a structural possibility, that failure is an essential risk in the operations under consideration; and then, with an almost *immediately simultaneous* gesture made in the name of a kind of ideal regulation, an exclusion of this risk as an accidental, exterior one” (100). That is, for Derrida, the “risk” of citation is the very structure of language, and cannot be excluded for the sake of idealizing a system.

Moreover, this inherent citationality is already an implicit part of Austin’s definition of the felicitous performative, because “the conventional procedure which by our utterance we are purporting to use must actually exist” (Austin 1432). To succeed, the performative must conform or refer in some way to an already-existing procedure; it must cite the performative-type it enacts. Thus, Derrida asks,

> is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, “non-serious,” that is, *citation* (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather, a general iterability\(^5\) – without which there would not even be a “successful” performative? Such that – a paradoxical, but inevitable consequence – a successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative. (103)

Indeed, no performative could succeed if it were “pure,” non-citational, unique, or singular, because it must conform to a conventional procedure, performing “a statement which in itself can only be of a repetitive or citational structure, or rather… of an iterable structure” (104). For Derrida, the citation is not what makes a stage-marriage infelicitous – its failure is related to improper context and performers. Instead, citation is what makes *every* performative possible;

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\(^5\) *Iterable*: legible, readable, repeatable, communicable (Derrida 90-1)
that it follows a pattern doesn’t make it less serious. To make his point clear, Derrida again asks,
“Could a performative statement succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable
statement, in other words, if the expressions I use to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage
were not identifiable as *conforming* to an iterable model, and therefore if they were not
identifiable in a way as ‘citation’?” (104). The performative works by repeating.

Thus, although Derrida accepts as useful much of Austin’s work, he rejects Austin’s
method of demarcation. Because performative utterances depend upon citationality just as all
language does, “parasitic” citation cannot be what differentiates between them; instead of
dividing discourse into purity and citationality, one must “construct a differential typology of
forms of iteration” (104). Austin attempts to idealistically simplify his system by limiting it to
“ordinary,” “serious” language, and Derrida’s response is to insist that we are no longer “able to
exclude, as Austin wishes, the ‘non-serious’ … from ‘ordinary’ language” (105). Austin’s “non-
serious,” stage-and-poem language does precisely what all language does: it cites other language.
Simply put, as Austin suggests and Derrida makes clear, the performative creates its meaning
through the repetition of an established, conventional form of speech and action.

From this, it is useful to note that ritual and pilgrimage *are citational practices*. In that
they are based on formalized structures, “[r]ituals are forms of customary behavior[…]. There is
always something about ritual that is stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant,
formal. This implies that ritual is repetitive in the sense that others have done it this way before”
(Rothenbuhler 20). Because of this, the effectiveness of the performative act (physical or vocal)
depends upon its ritual nature – its conventionality, its subordination to accepted patterns, its
citation-ability. A performative speech act works because it is a conventional, communally-
established ritual. Thus, it is always a citation, a repetition, containing a trace of an accepted
pattern. As Derrida insists, its functionality depends upon its citational work: the performative works within a culturally constructed, accepted, oft-repeated ritual structure or context. That is, although pilgrims may or may not think of their behavior as scripted, they are in some way following a “repetitive or citational structure.” Even if one’s pilgrimage is almost entirely self-invented, the fact that the pilgrim goes on a journey and thinks of it as “pilgrimage” means that she is working within the broad (but nonetheless formalized) “structure” of pilgrimage. That is, just as standardized forms make symbolic rituals understandable to the audience, it is (on some level) the citational practice of pilgrimage that makes the journey meaningful.

Butler’s Performative Identity

As Derrida’s work suggests, the performative is aptly named because it not only performs its action as it speaks it, but it is enacted through performance of a conventional form. Such an idea expands “the performative” from the speech-act to other meanings created and constructed in the same way, including the creation of self and identity through the citation of established forms – and, by extension, alternative forms – of speech and action. It is here that Butler is drawn in: meaning (in her case, gender identity) is created by the repetition and citation of a conventional structure of ritual acts (speech or otherwise); this has become so “naturalized” that its ritualized nature, its fact of being constructed through citational repetition, has been obscured.

In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler added to the discussion of “the performative” by suggesting the idea of performance as a key way of understanding the creation and re-creation of sex and gender. Butler argues that traditional, seemingly “rational” (or “orthodox”) notions of sex, gender, masculinity, and femininity are not inherent, normal, or original, but created, and that therefore gender – like Austin’s performative language – cannot be broken down into “true
or false” or “correct or deviant” identity or behavior. For her, gender is performative because it is not original or inherent, but is established through a series of actions and reenactments that become so repeated as to seem natural. For “gender transformation” to be made possible, as Butler argues it should, the gendered self must be seen for what it is – a performance, a repetition for which there is no original or right / wrong, not a straitjacketed identity category.

Butler’s argument begins with the insistence that gender identity is enacted, not inherent:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted […] through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (191)

There is an appearance of “true” gender only because “words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance”; importantly, however this “internal” identity is inscribed not internally at all, but only “on the surface of the body” (185). This exterior identity suggests an internal that, for Butler, is nonexistent. Instead, the surface is created through performance, the repeated action and citation of behaviors that are established and ingrained through cultural discourse. Moreover,

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (185)
From here, Butler can declare the crux of her argument: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false” (186).

Butler then expands her idea of the performance of gender through a concrete example: drag. Drag performers are quite literally performing a gender, inscribing its outward signs onto their bodies and upsetting the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Thus, “If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (187). If drag artists can “play” gender identity as their “act,” then Butler questions what other kinds of “gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” (189). She suggests that gender is “a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (190). As in drag, the meaning of identity is not natural or internal, but signed onto the body through a series of signifiers and repeated actions; it is the same, Butler argues, for all of us.

Once gender is recognized as an exterior performance, then gender can be understood as a cultural signification, and not inherent, internal, or natural; not based on a pre-existing original, but re-imagined and re-created, as an individual identity, by each “performer.” Therefore, If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender. (192)
For Butler, the performance of gender is so powerful because it has been normatized; the repeated acts are so standardized and repeated so unconsciously and so frequently that the performance is seamless. Nonetheless, it must be understood as “an act”: “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (191). Thus, the performance of gender, like that a speech act, depends upon culturally established, iterable codes that make meaning by conforming to an accepted context and pattern.

It is in this way that pilgrims’ enactment of their gender (and, similarly, their spirituality) through ritual can be through of as “performative.” Identity, such as gender, can be reenacted according to “socially established” meanings and forms, or can be “played” in other ways. Like drag artists, pilgrims – temporarily separated from everyday social structures – can perform their identity in other ways. Thus, their ritual enactments of identity are “both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 190). There is an important difference, however. Drag artists, faced with dissonance between their biological sex and their performance of gender, carefully follow the “conventional form” of female gender. In contrast, pilgrims may find themselves free to challenge these conventions; perform other, alternative forms; or play with performances of identity that are outside of convention altogether. In this way, they can construct new – but nonetheless not “false” – gendered and spiritual identities.

RITUALS ARE TRANSFORMATIVE

The work of ritual can be understood through the term of linguists and philosophers: it is “performative,” it does what it says. Within the ritual context, the citation of an established
convention (almost always physical, and often verbal) does not describe an event, it performs it. Ritualists take this one step further. The ritual is not just performative, it is transformative: it changes someone or creates something new. In Austin’s typical example, the wedding, the words “I do” do not just perform the event, they create a wife. They transform two single people into a married couple. Something that did not exist a moment ago – a married couple – has been brought into existence by the efficacy of the ritual.

Three major modes of ritual are the most relevant to pilgrimage, and also explicitly transformative, so will help to illuminate this concept: rituals of transition, rituals that perform the ideal, and rituals that make the absent present.

The most obviously transformative rituals are those that allow for transition, including “rites of passage.” During such times of transition, ritual works as “a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces” – such as child and adult, outsider and insider, or citizen and ruler – “comes together” (Bell 16). Within these transitions, rituals act performatively; that is, as they symbolically effect change, they create actual change as well, so that a participant actually becomes an adult, a community member, a citizen, or a king.

Perhaps the most obviously performative rituals are what Turner, drawing on van Gennep, labeled “rites of passage.” As Turner described it,

Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or ‘transition’ are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying ‘threshold’ in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from
both. During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more. (89)

In his studies of the Aboriginal rites through which boys became men, Turner identified the ways in which this ritual brings such oppositional forces together, and also highlights the difference and the “liminal space” between them. “Liminality” occurs when participants move between systems (from childhood to adulthood, from an uninitiated state to full membership, from daily individual life to stylized group interaction, or between two opposing social communities); they exist “betwixt and between,” in a space between the worlds or roles (Turner 89). As participants assume their roles within such rituals, they “are neither what they were nor what they will become […] neither children nor adults, male nor female, human nor animal. They are momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, in preparation for something new” (Ray 59). In this liminal moment, they are able to distance themselves from their normal roles, explore the possibilities, and move from an old life to a new one.

What is most intriguing about these rituals is the presence of possibilities. In the liminal moment, “the usual order of things is reversed and thrown back to primordial chaos, waiting to be reestablished and renewed” (Ray 59). When she finds herself in a moment without form or order, the participant will probably become what she intended to be – a wife, citizen, or adult – but not necessarily. Indeed,

In this interim of “liminality,” the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a
potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements. (Turner 13–14, italics added)

Particularly in truly liminal spaces, in a world set aside from “the usual order of things,” the participant may be transformed in ways she did not expect or could not predict; “liminality is not only transition but also potentiality, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’” (Turner and Turner 3). For example, in Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors, Turner points to pilgrimage in particular as a clear example of liminality, through which participants are in a “between-world,” outside of their normal physical location, relationship to time, religious participation, and social identity. Furthermore, Turner suggests that those participants within a state of liminality are linked not by social structure but by their shared “anti-structure,” which he called “communitas.” For Turner, communitas is not simply “structure with its signs reversed, […] but rather the fons et origo of all structures and, at the same time, their critique. For its very existence puts all social structural rules in question and suggest new possibilities” (202). Thus, by simultaneously performing and critiquing social structure, participants united by communitas are not only personally transformed, but are also able to re-form and re-structure society.

Thus, transitional rituals allow passage between two opposite or opposing worlds or states of being. As with speech acts, the ritual does something, and transforms the participant from what she was into what she will be. Being transformed into what one “will be” or “should be” is also a part of the next two types of transformative rituals: those that perform the ideal and those that make the absent present.

Rituals can also create change in other ways: those that embody the ideal cause participants to become what they act out, thus shaping individual identity and establishing social
cohesion or social structures. These rituals “occur in the subjunctive mood. They are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be. […] They are occasions for imagining the way things could be or evaluating how they ought to be” (Rothenbuhler 15).

Particularly within a liminal space, outside of everyday social structure, participants are free to perform their ideal or possible selves. One can not only imagine the possibilities, but enact them, embodying what they “might be.” Victor Turner, as well, sees ritual “as able ‘to mediate between the formed and the indeterminate’ for these especially entertain the subjunctive mood, thus employing a serious engagement of new visions of reality” (B. Smith 466).

Moreover, through embodying the possibilities that “are not” – not yet true or possible – but that “might be, or ought to be,” participants literally bring those possibilities into existence.

In ritual, doing is believing […]. By dramatizing abstract, invisible conceptions, it makes vivid and palpable our ideas and wishes, and, as Geertz has observed, the lived-in order merges with the dreamed-of order. (Meyerhoff 395)

Because the participant performs “the ideal” (that which “is not” but “ought to be”), through physical, bodily ritual, what “is not” becomes, if only temporarily, what is. In that moment, the ideal physically, literally exists. Thus, ritual can be powerfully transformative: the participant, living in a world that is far less than ideal, can use ritual to imagine and perform an “unlimited series of alternative social arrangements” (Turner 14). By embodying these alternatives and bringing the ideal into temporary existence, the participant discovers or confirms that the ideal, even if seemingly impossible, can be made real. This discovery may inspire her to continue such ritual enactments, and even to begin to be transformed into the ideal possibility. As Clifford Geertz phrased it, “In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world” (112).
This type of ritual is also performative: it does what it says. In performing rituals, participants consciously or voluntarily behave in ways that may be more polite, generous, or obedient; more connected to deity or community; or more fully engaged in their beliefs than they behave in less structured moments. However, in “performing” being more polite or more connected, we are or become those very things, so that, “socially, our ritually structured conduct of ourselves, on examination, turns out to be who we are” (Rothenbuhler 25). In this way, “ideal” possibilities, structures, and identities “are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means” – that is, through ritual (Butler 185). Thus, identity is, as Butler puts it, “tenuously constituted […] through a stylized repetition of acts” (191). The imagined ideal, that which “is not” but “ought to be,” can be made real through the repetition of transformative ritual’s symbolic order.

Finally, ritual action often has a function (or effect) that is unquestionably transformative: to make the absent present. “Because it is performance and not verbal description or exhortation, ritual brings the far-away, the long-ago, and the not-yet into the here-and-now” (Driver 190). The past, the future, the mythical, and the divine, impossibly, can all be present at once. Indeed, “Ritual always links fellow participants but often goes beyond this to connect a group of celebrants to wider collectivites, even the ancestors and those unborn. Religious rituals go farther, connecting mankind to the forces of nature and purposes of the deities, reading the forms of macrocosm in the microcosm” (Myerhoff 395). Christian sacraments, for example, bring the presence of God and an ideal, future state of grace into the present moment:

It is vital to understand that sacraments do not only point to something transcendent or something not yet in being: They also actualize something in
present time and place, making possible, if only for a time, a kind of life otherwise remote. […] In theological terms, they invoke and celebrate the presence of God in the midst of the gathered community. In the sacraments, one actually partakes, here and now, of that which is going to be. One does not merely hear about it or have a visible reminder. (Driver 206)

In this way, enacting the “not-yet” is one of the ways that ritual works, subjunctively, to create the ideal. As with the real-but-fictive nature of the envisioned ideal, participants embody that which should be, might be, or will be. Thus, they enact a paradox: because the is and is-not are co-present, they are able to move away from what is and create the embodied ideal.

Rational political methods alone cannot bring about transformation of a society from a less to a more just condition, because they cannot fuse the visionary with the actual (the absent with the present) as rituals do, thus profoundly affecting the moral life. Nor can ideas alone do this, for in order to bear fruit ideas require flesh-and-blood performance. (Driver 184)

In ritual, that which is not present – the past, future, divine, or ideal – has the power to be made present, and therefore made real.

Two other observations reveal how ritual transformation works. The first is that ritual works through paradox, not logic; it cannot be rational. By definition, paradox is the tension between two opposing ideas that, at first glance, seem to be irreconcilable – and yet coexist. It is the conjunction of opposing, even clashing, ideas that, together, transcend rationality to reveal hidden insight. To be effective, the paradox must be both believed and embodied, acted out in some way. Through this ritual enactment, the paradox is able to make the impossible true: to
make the absent present, to bring the past into the here-and-now, to transform what *is* into what *is-not* but *should be*.

In all three of the above-described modes of ritual, paradox is the primary space through which ritual makes the absent present and embodies the ideal. It makes room for tension between opposites, allowing them to coexist without being reconciled simplistically. In that sense, ritual paradox is more “real” than idealized rationality, because its complexity does not attempt to “make perfect sense” of the illogic of life. Thus, paradox is key to understanding and expressing the “complexities and oppositions in reality and human life” because it is not limited by rationality (Kainz 58). It is important that ritual work be allowed to remain paradoxically inexplicable, not explained away by reason. It is the ritual, not the logic, that does the work.

Because it allows for the ambiguities and irreconcilable illogic of lived experience, paradox can “prove to be one of the highest forms of truth. It may be that those who embrace both sides of an apparent contradiction often will be nearer the full truth than those who surrender one or the other facet in favor of an artificial consistency” (Slaatte xiv). Such “truth” is often related to the mysteries of religion, which work within an eternal and ineffable plane of existence far removed from the limits of human reason.

Thus, ritual works as the architecture of paradox: ritual can do what rationality cannot do, because it is not bound by the rational. In some cases, ritual paradox may become so standardized that it comes to be seen as rational, but it is not. It does the impossible. It allows for opposites to coexist, for laws of rationality to be broken (the divine can enter into the mundane; the past can enter into the present; the ideal can enter into the real), for what *is-not* to become what *is*. Ritual is paradoxical by nature. Paradox is both why ritual is necessary and what it does; that which is not paradoxical does not need ritual to resolve it.
In ritual, paradox works through embodied faith. It requires a suspension of rationality in order to do the seemingly impossible. Both polarities, the real and the ideal, the true and the false (or, as often, the impossibly also-true), must coexist, before ritual can enact a union between them. Thus, ritual works because of, not in spite of, the paradox it contains.

In religious ritual, however, such faith-based paradoxes are not merely accepted, but affirmed – not philosophical coincidences to be solved, but divine uncertainties that need not be resolved, because the truth lies in the creative tension between opposing ideas, in the mystery of “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is a paradox. In any religion, it is the uncompromising belief in that which cannot be seen, heard, known, touched, tasted, tested, or proved. Its object is impossible, illogical. And yet, for the faithful, the impossible is the most true; it is unquestioned because it is mysterious. Faith is a paradox; a paradox is only held through faith. “‘Looked at from either within or without … faith is purely paradoxical, a coincidentia oppositorum from without, for no amount of reasoning can bring you there’” (Slaatte 92). It is the acceptance of such divine mystery that then points to and allows for a significance and unity in the commonplace paradoxes of human existence.

Beyond belief, moreover, ritual requires action. Paradox may be used in poetry, art, and theology to express the ineffable, but for it to be truly transformative, paradox must be embodied, theatricalized, lived in the body and inscribed upon the flesh. The is-not, when given physical form, can become the is. Ritualized faith goes beyond believing the impossible; the impossible becomes possible in countless rituals that embody a present absence, a present past, and an active incongruity, understood primarily not through the mind but through the body. Paradox, although appearing to be a question of logic, is made manifest through physicality. Indeed, “Ritual knowledge is gained by and through the body […] not by detached observation or contemplation
but through action” (Driver 188). In the body, paradoxes are believed, not prior to, but as they are acted out in ritual; in this way, ritual must precede belief, and yet must be believed-in in order to be meaningfully enacted. These embodiments are strikingly trans-rational.

Performing that which is impossible or illogical works, through ritual paradox, to create transformation. However, ritual paradox is not a foreign thing, distant from the rational logic of American culture. Indeed, perhaps the most startlingly paradoxical faith-based rite in our culture is the transubstantiative Eucharist. To the doubting outsider, the ritual is impossible; it insists that cracker becomes flesh and wine becomes blood, despite retaining their outward properties. What is more, the Catholic act of taking the Eucharist is not the symbolic “remembrance” practiced by many Protestant congregations; it is literal, albeit spiritual, nourishment. As the participant takes in Christ’s body and blood, she takes God’s presence and being into her own body, enabling her to share God with the world. This embodied act of faith physically links eternal divinity and temporal earthliness in a way that is impossible, to do the impossible. The ideal – God-with-us – becomes real, because it is envisioned and embodied and believed.

Transformation, then, is the paradoxical work of ritual, and is an inescapable part of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a typical “liminal” space, set apart from ordinary existence, during which pilgrims may imagine and explore “alternative social arrangements” and transition from an old identity to a new one. As pilgrims “perform the past” and embody the “ideal,” they bring what “is not” into the present, and the irrational or impossible is embodied and enacted in ritual. This physicalization of what “is not” but “ought to be,” then, allows the ideal to become real, the visionary to be fused with the actual, and the absent to become present. Thus, in the ritual of pilgrimage, the paradoxical is lived out as true and, instead of being reduced to a question of logic, remains mysterious – and does its magical work.
The second observation about ritual transformation is its *continuity*. I have been using the word “transformation” because it is how Turner, Driver, and others describe the work of ritual. I find it a useful term not only because it is common to much writing on the subject, but because it so vividly and succinctly describes the change that can take place. It is not just that ritual allows for the possibility of change; it *effects* change, or *does* what it “says.”

Nonetheless, the word “transformation” may not be the best term, because it has a connotation of being *immediate*, as if a participant is one thing, and then suddenly and completely is the opposite. Sometimes, this sort of “snap change” is exactly what happens, especially during rituals that are explicitly about transition. “Rites of passage,” for example, seem to follow this pattern, as do many of the rituals Austin used as illustrations: coronations, christenings, weddings, and so on. Quite suddenly, and within the timeframe of the ritual itself, a woman becomes the queen, a baby receives his name, or two people become a married couple. “Transformation” effectively describes the immediate change that is common to these rituals.

However, there are three problems with applying this sort of expectation for sudden and immediate “transformation” to all rituals. The first and perhaps most obvious is that the change effected by ritual must *continue* in order to be effective. A ritual may transform a woman into a queen or two individuals into a couple, but the work does not end there. No ritual can make a woman *queenly*; no rite can make a marriage *succeed*. Certainly, the ritual’s performative is “felicitous”; it may be legal, binding, or in some other way permanent. However, ritual can do what it does because it takes place outside of ordinary time; the ritual is a “transition from everyday life to an alternative framework within which the everyday is transformed” (Driver 183). Once the participant returns to the community, she must begin the process of learning how to *be* that which she has become. If she does not, the ritual has still had performative effect, but
has been “abused.” The most transformative rituals are those marked by sustainability or continuity – the participant’s ability to continue to live out the transformation begun by the ritual.

Second, the expectation of immediate transformation is also problematic in that, in some ways, the pattern is masculine in nature. Its prototypical example is boys’ coming-of-age rites, to which Turner applied van Gennep’s three-part process (separation, margin or liminality, and aggregation). Turner has been criticized for this work because he applies a boys’ rite to all rites. Indeed, the pattern does not necessarily apply to women’s rituals. For example, Carolyn Walker Bynum has critiqued Turner’s “notion of the central place in what he calls ‘liminality’ of images of status reversal or status elevation” (106). She notes that Turner’s ideas are able to describe the stories and symbols of men better than those of women. Women’s stories […] are in fact less processual than men’s; they don’t have turning points. And when women recount their own lives, the themes are less climax, conversion, reintegration and triumph, the liminality of reversal or elevation, than continuity. (108)

In part, the difference is biological: upon reaching puberty, a boy is transformed into a man, a permanent transition to a fixed end state. Once initiated (by biology and/or ritual), a man will remain in his new state: capable of sexual activity, and therefore “a man.” A woman’s transitions, on the other hand, are far more fluid. Although a girl may be initiated as “a woman” after her first menstruation, she has not achieved a fixed state; she will transition through cycles of fertility, the physical changes of pregnancy, and then another major change at menopause. While the menopausal body may be a woman’s “end state,” she moves through many equally important physical changes along the way. Because of this, many cultures understand women to have three major phases – often called maiden, mother, and crone – instead of men’s two.
Third, rituals created and performed by women are also often characterized by circles and spirals, indicating an interest not in sudden transformation to a new permanent state but in continual movement and transformation. This is linked to the final problem with the immediate connotation of “transformation”: it suggests an expectation of results. When a boy passes through a coming-of-age ritual, he achieves a permanent, identifiable result. In contrast, many other rituals – including many created by women – do not seek such measurable, name-able change. Celebrations of the moon’s or seasons’ changes, Eucharistic rituals performed by women with milk and honey instead of bread and wine, and even feminist consciousness-raising group meetings are more about “becoming” than achieving results. Through such rituals, participants open up a space of experiencing Turner’s “potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements”: a multiplicity of possibilities that can be imagined and embodied (Turner 14). These rituals are the work of becoming, performing changes that make wider change possible in the world. Driver uses the word “transformation” in this way, in that his focus is on rituals that imagine freedom from injustice and oppression, embody “liberation theology,” and have the possibility to transform the world. His ultimate example is celebrating a corporeally symbolic communion, “performed not only by the people present but by God collaborating with them” – a performance that “is not simply about the freedom that the Christian gospel proclaims but is also an embodiment of that freedom” (207, 200). Although this rite’s immediate, quantifiable, or identifiable results are limited, it acts out a liberation from oppression that can, once envisioned in the ritual setting, be made manifest in the world. Rituals of “becoming” continually enact the promise of transformation.

Pilgrimage is a transformative, performative ritual. Through it, participants do what their rituals “say”: they honor the sacred space, commune with the divine, and embody the past. Their
rituals afford the opportunity to enter a liminal state, set apart from ordinary time and “socially established” patterns of behavior; here, they can imagine and enact unlimited possibilities of social structures and identities. They perform the past, give shape to the present, and make the absent present. They do so through paradox and embodied faith, ritually performing the impossible and therefore making it possible. Throughout all of this, such pilgrims engage in “becoming,” celebrating rituals that may have no quantifiable purpose but that might, through continual cycles of transformation, change the world.

However, as a performative, pilgrimage breaks the rules. According to Austin, ritual that is not performed with the “appropriate authority” (that is, not according to “orthodoxy”) is infelicitous; it “misfires” and is therefore void (“J. L. Austin” 1429). However, pilgrimage and its rituals are often performed without the proper authority – communion bread broken without a priest, or a citation of “the past” performed without any “real” past to base the performance upon. Pilgrimage often lacks the authority, usually archival, of priest, orthodoxy, liturgy, tradition, or sacred text, as well as the authority of “history” (whether in the form of written or archaeological records). And yet it works. The performative creation of identity through pilgrimage is efficacious – it is transformative – even without the “authority” of “orthodoxy.”

Instead, pilgrimage creates its own authority. “The past” that pilgrims recreate or appeal to is created through performance; it does not need to be definitively pre-existing. Its authority is created through performance: by performing a belief about “the past,” that past establishes the authority necessary for effective performance, which leads to transformation. Performance of an (unproveable) past as true makes it true, even without Austin’s “authority.” The “past” is efficacious – it creates change – whether or not it is “true.” Believing – even hoping – that your ritual performance is citational (that it “quotes” established forms of ritual) is enough to make
that citation effective. Perhaps this is because the “authority” of “history” is unnecessary when the purpose of “performing the past” is to change the present or embody an ideal future. It’s enough to perform as if it were true; the subjunctive work of ritual still works, since ritual is never performing what is, but what “could be” or “ought to be.” Performing “what the past could have been” works through ritual paradox, and can do what rationality cannot. Pilgrimage it brings the “past” (even a nonexistent past), future, absent, far-away, and imagined into the here-and-now, and gives physical form to what “is not,” making it what “is.”

As both a particular type of ritual and an occasion upon which other rituals are performed, pilgrimage is a physical action performed for an audience, it regards that which is held sacred, and it operates according to standardized forms and symbolic meanings. The rituals of pilgrimage are effective because they are “performative” in Austin’s and Butler’s sense of the term: the acting-out of the ritual creates what it names. They are also “transformative”: by embodying and enacting what “might be,” they bring an ideal, future state into existence in the present. This transformation is achieved only through ritual paradox; it is not a rational or scientific change. It is also not usually an immediate, permanent one; instead, pilgrimage invites a state of “becoming,” working through continual cycles of transformation toward an end goal that may be neither quantifiable nor immanent. Through pilgrimage’s particular ritual paradoxes, it “breaks the rules” of Austin’s performative, and is efficacious without the required authority. Performance of the past – a performance that is illogical both because that “past” no longer exists and because it quite possibly never did exist – makes “the past” true, and thus creates the authority necessary to make the ritual’s performative acts “felicitous.” Thus, the “authority” of pilgrimage, based not in orthodoxy or sacred text but in felt beliefs about the sacredness of the site, makes the ritual performance of identity transformative and effective.
CHAPTER THREE. CONTEXTUALIZING FUTURECHURCH

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your [...] daughters will prophesy.”

– Joel 2:28

Although the phrase “Catholic pilgrimage” may bring to mind images of invalids being dipped in the healing waters of Lourdes or pious saints ascending to a hilltop shrine on their knees – that is, of conservative Catholics affirming their faith in the Church through age-old rituals – a small but growing subset of Catholic pilgrims are interested not in conserving Church tradition and orthodoxy but in reforming it. In particular, on a recent pilgrimage to Rome led by the organization FutureChurch, participants sought out sites, such as the Catacombs of Priscilla, that suggest the importance of women’s leadership to the early Christian church. In journeying to and performing rituals at these sites – that is, by using the tools of the repertoire – the pilgrims embodied their challenge to Church teachings that stand against women’s ordination. Instead, they affirmed their belief in the historical precedent of women’s church leadership and in the orthodoxy of women’s leadership and ordination.

First, the pilgrims journeyed to discover the hidden history of early women church leaders first-hand, interpreting the visual evidence through storytelling and imagination and remembering the forgotten women through liturgy and ritual. In doing so, they used repertoiric performances to challenge the orthodox interpretations of the archive, assert new interpretations as more accurate, and use ritual to recover ancient women leaders as “spiritual ancestors.” Then, by performing a bread-breaking, Eucharistic ritual inspired by their imaginative memories of those women, the pilgrims created and performed a hotly contested gendered and spiritual
identity, that of the “woman priest.” Moreover, they did so while on pilgrimage (an ancient spiritual practice) to Rome (the birthplace and “seat” of the Church); that is, they legitimized their alternative identity performances by situating them within ancient church practice, theology, tradition, and even physical site. In this way, I suggest, these women’s performances in Roman catacombs may transform the gender-role expectations tied to ordination and leadership, within these church movements and within the contemporary Catholic Church itself.

Throughout my study of this pilgrimage and its context, three theoretical perspectives are useful. First, the pilgrims’ rituals of re-membering are tools of the repertoire, performances that Diana Taylor suggests are valid “way[s] of knowing” and of transmitting knowledge (xvi). Both on this pilgrimage and throughout the study of ritualizing that follows, two overlapping types of repertoiric performances stand out: remembering erased women and creating alternative rituals. Then, the pilgrims’ performances of their gendered, spiritual identity – particularly as “priestly women” – align with Judith Butler’s statement that acts of identity “are not expressive but performative.” Through ritual, as these women performed identities in ways that reflected alternative ideas about gender, spirituality, Catholicism, and the priesthood, “these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (192, italics added). That is, performing one’s identity constitutes that identity. Finally, Tom Driver’s description of ritual as “transformative” highlights the power of these women’s rituals and liturgies to effect change in the women’s own identity performances, in theology, and in the church.

In this chapter, I will begin by defining FutureChurch and contextualizing this organization within the much wider movement of organizations concerned with Catholic feminist spirituality, ritualizing, and ordination. Working “between conformity and schism,” this movement reforms and transforms the church while maintaining claims to represent a
legitimately Catholic point of view. I then consider four key aims of Catholic feminists in
general and FutureChurch in particular: to analyze inherited oppression, search for suppressed
history, risk new interpretations of tradition that reflect women’s lived experiences, and seek
transformation. Finally, I consider the ways in which the performance of ritual and the tools of
the repertoire, including pilgrimage and liturgy, are particularly suited to such transformative
aims. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the FutureChurch pilgrimage itself, considering
the ways in which it uses performance and ritual to embody those four key aims and identifying
the healing transformations it seeks to effect in the pilgrims’ lives.

As I work through this chapter, my goal is to consolidate and summarize a wide range of
Catholic feminist theology, identifying and interpreting those beliefs that I see reflected in the
pilgrims’ identity performances in Rome. This theology is foundational both for my analysis in
the following chapter and for the pilgrimage itself, and likely shaped the choices made by the
pilgrimage planners and leaders. My intent here is not to critique this ideology or to take sides
on its theological or historical accuracy, but to identify those ideas that are significant within a
wide range of literature and are played out in performance throughout the Rome pilgrimage.

Although the question of women’s ordination has been definitively answered (in the
negative) by the Vatican, the discussion continues. Moreover, the serious shortage of priests and
the recent decision to invite married Anglican priests to convert suggest that debates about
ordination will be ongoing, and rituals such as this one are an important way of keeping that
debate visible. The conversation regarding the role of women in the church is also crucial in the
flourishing field of feminism and spirituality, in which the debate about reforming religion from
within versus escaping an irredeemably patriarchal system is becoming more nuanced and less
binary. This study uses performance studies to add to that conversation; by examining women’s
pilgrimages on both sides of that debate (reform vs. separation), it reveals the similarities – not
the binary divisions – between their performances. In doing so, it also breaks new ground:
although quite a few books have been written about women’s spirituality, women’s ritualizing,
and the women’s ordination debate, I know of none that are concerned with pilgrimages taken by
women who are both Christian (that is, still within the church) and reformists (that is, seeking
transformation of the church, not affirmation or conservation of already-orthodox ideas). Most
studies on these women’s spiritual performances focus on liturgy, not pilgrimage. Certainly,
nothing beyond a few small articles has been written about this pilgrimage in particular.

Throughout this chapter, I am primarily describing movements, beliefs, and theologians
specifically Roman Catholic in origin. However, there is significant overlap between these
writers’ ideas and wider Christian theology, and there are others making similar claims while
working from a Protestant point of view. Because of this overlap, I refer both to “Catholic
feminist theology” and belief, and to a more general “Christian feminist theology.” Similarly, I
use the term “church” to refer primarily to the Roman Catholic Church, but also to the Christian
church as a whole. I capitalize “Church” to indicate hierarchy, government, and “orthodoxy.”

I also mention what is often called “radical gospel equality.” This refers to the belief,
common among most Christian feminists, that Christ’s actions and ideas were egalitarian in
nature, not privileging men over women, and that his mission involved establishing all people’s
equality before God. Feminist historiography also sees the first-century church as egalitarian,
inspired by Christ’s values and the Pauline declaration that there is neither “male nor female” in
Christ (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, Christian feminist theology often appeals to this “radical equality”
as central to the “Gospel mission” and as a value that should be embraced today.
DEFINITIONS

FutureChurch

Headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, FutureChurch is an inter-parish coalition of Catholics that promotes the equality and ordination of any baptized Catholic “called to priestly ministry by God,” including women and married persons. For the past twenty years, this organization has focused on educating Catholic individuals and parishes about the priest shortage, the long history of married priests, and the history of women leaders in the early church, and on advocating on behalf of the large number of women lay ministers.

In response to the proposed closure of a Cleveland parish facing a priest shortage, FutureChurch was founded in 1990 as a local network of twenty-eight parishes calling for consideration of optional celibacy and women’s ordination; the group suggested these as better alternatives than losing access to the Catholic Mass due to the priest shortage. Its founder and executive director is Sr. Christine Schenk, a Sister of Saint Joseph who holds a Masters in Theology from St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland as well as an M.A. in midwifery. The organization now has five staff members and over five thousand member-donors internationally; over eight thousand Catholics rooted in the parish experience have purchased its resources (Schenk).

As listed on its website, FutureChurch’s mission statement is as follows:

FutureChurch is a national coalition of parish-centered Catholics who seek the full participation of all baptized Catholics in the life of the Church.

FutureChurch, inspired by Vatican II, recognizes that Eucharistic Celebration (the Mass) is the core of Roman Catholic worship and sacramental life. We
advocate that this celebration be available universally and at least weekly to all baptized Catholics.

FutureChurch respects the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and its current position on ordination and advocates widespread discussion of the need to open ordination to all baptized Catholics who are called to priestly ministry by God and the people of God.

FutureChurch seeks to participate in formulating and expressing the Sensus Fidelium (the Spirit inspired beliefs of the faithful) through open, prayerful and enlightened dialogue with other Catholics locally and globally.

In its press releases, FutureChurch describes itself in a similar way, and also critiques “the systemic inequality of women in the Catholic Church” (“Rome Pilgrimage Honors”). As the third point in this mission statement makes clear, FutureChurch is clearly working from within the Church, placing it clearly on the “Reformist” side of feminist spirituality.

Because the Vatican has essentially forbidden discussion of women’s ordination, these statements may sound a bit hesitant (e.g., advocating “discussion of the need to open ordination” instead of advocating ordination directly). However, these statements reveal at least three tactics used to defend FutureChurch’s support, both tacit and overt, for the ordination of women and married persons. First, FutureChurch defends the equality of “all baptized Catholics” and challenges “the systemic inequality of women” – thus legitimizing its advocacy as necessary for equality, and subtly reframing the Vatican’s “orthodox” opposition as promoting inequality. Next, FutureChurch defends the right of all baptized Catholics to receive the Mass, a need that cannot currently be met due to the priest shortage. This legitimizes its advocacy as theologically necessary, and reframes Vatican “orthodoxy” as irresponsible adherence to tradition at all costs
and blindness to the spiritual needs of those Catholics, often living in poverty, who can receive the Eucharist only rarely because their priests each serve many parishes. Third, FutureChurch clearly situates its voice in this discussion within “the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church” and “the Spirit inspired beliefs of the faithful” – thus legitimizing its advocacy as a genuine part of church orthodoxy, and reframing the Vatican opposition as silencing its faithful members and even the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A fourth tactic is clear from even a cursory view of the organization’s website: tying its support for women’s leadership and ordination to the “Women Witnesses” of the Bible and to Mary of Magdala in particular – thus legitimizing its advocacy as historically accurate and grounded in the example of the very early church, and reframing the Vatican position as historically inaccurate and grounded not in ancient church tradition but in the tradition of patriarchal oppression and erasure of women leaders. The pilgrimage to Rome is an important way in which FutureChurch supports its third and fourth tactics through performance: uncovering and remembering women leaders within the context of one of the oldest “traditions of the Roman Catholic Church,” pilgrimage to the catacombs of Rome.

**Women-Church and the Women’s Ordination Conference**

FutureChurch’s interest in women’s ordination within the Catholic Church is related to an extensive, largely but not exclusively feminist, movement of women, collectives, and organizations that embrace alternative performances of women’s spirituality and support women’s equal participation within Judeo-Christian religions. The past thirty years have seen an explosion of church participation, ritual creation, and academic study in the overlapping fields of women’s spirituality; feminist theology, Christology, and ecclesiology; women’s liturgy and

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1 Some of the other organizations concerned with equality in ordination include CORPUS, Call to Action, Dignity, and the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church. In 1991, FutureChurch and the Women’s Ordination Convention joined with these groups and over thirty others as the coalition Catholic Organizations for Renewal.
ritualizing; and feminist historiographical study of the Bible, the Torah, and the Judeo-Christian past represented by (and erased from) those sacred books and subsequent Church history.

Much of this work has been done by women (and some men) who are affiliated with several loose coalitions. Among the most prominent is the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), the oldest and largest organization dedicated to securing women’s ordination as bishops, priests, and deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. Since 1975, WOC has promoted a “renewed priestly ministry”: a non-hierarchical priesthood, an egalitarian relationship between priests and laity, and a “priestly ministry” that extends outside the boundaries of the official priesthood. In doing so, it challenges binaries that limit women’s performance and allows women to constitute their “priestly” identities through both sacramental and non-sacramental performances.2

One of the most significant outgrowths of the WOC is the Women-Church Convergence, a coalition (organized in 1983) that has come to include both individual and national groups drawn together by their alternative, and widely varied, performances of their identities as spiritual women and by their desire to use ritual and performance as transformative tools.3 The most overt performances of “priestly” identities are those of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests, a collection of women who have been “illegally” ordained – by male bishops in good standing or by ordained Womenbishops – as deacons, priests, and bishops in the Roman Catholic Church.

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2 Similarly, many women work for a renewed, less hierarchical priesthood in the international Roman Catholic Church as part of Women’s Ordination Worldwide, founded in Austria in 1996.
3 Because Women-Church is a network, not an institution or a church, it does not mandate that its members belong to a particular denomination or even to be Christian at all; it “consciously refuses these either-ors in favor of a process approach that allows a variety of options along a spectrum” (Ruether, “Defecting” 250). This diversity is reflected in the names of the feminist spirituality groups sampled in Defecting in Place, which “give some indication of the wide range of feminist collectives that exist for support, study, spirituality, creative expression, ministry to women, political action, and ritual innovation” (Winter 124). Winter lists 108 such organizations, including “WomenSpirit, WomanGift, Women of Vision, […] Hannah’s House, Spiritual Sisters, Sacred Space, Twelve Apostates, Sisters of Sophia, Sophia Group, Earth Cycle Group, […] Lesbian Catholics Together, Dream Support Group, […] Asian Women Theologians, Women of Color Theological Anthropology Group, […] Dianic Moon Worship Group, Roman Catholic Women’s Support Group, […] and Women-church” (Winter 124–25). Among those regional groups affiliated with Women-Church are Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual; Chicago Catholic Women; Leadership Conference of Women Religious; Black Sisters; Las Hermanas; and two social justice centers, the Quixote Center and the Center of Concern (Weaver 131, Conn 16).
Women also ritualize and gather at conferences, most famously the much-disputed Re-Imagining Conference held in Minneapolis in 1993, at which participants used feminine imagery, including Sophia-Spirit, to name God in their liturgies and rituals. Due to the controversial nature of such “unorthodox” ritualizing and the Vatican gag order on discussing women’s ordination at all, women’s very attendance at these conferences can be a way of performing their gendered and spiritual identity in new ways. For example, when Women’s Ordination Worldwide held its first international conference in Dublin in June 2001, the keynote speaker was Sister Joan Chittister – despite the fact that the Vatican had forbidden her to attend. Her attendance, supported by her prioress and the other sisters of her priory, was a way of constituting her identity as “a woman Religious” in an alternative, unorthodox way. This performance embodied her belief that supporting women’s ordination – not silently submitting to Rome’s “orthodoxy” – was in fact the more legitimate embodiment of Catholic spirituality.

As with FutureChurch, those who participate in these organizations, with few exceptions, support women’s ordination and full equality in church leadership, and so theology originating out of this movement will be considered within a discussion of FutureChurch’s pilgrimage.

THE CATHOLIC FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

Feminist Thought among Catholic Women

Although not all people who support women’s ordination identify as feminist, the majority of leading writers, theologians, and teachers within this broad movement do so. In her lecture on “Faith, Feminism, and the Future,” Sister Sandra M. Schneiders offers a definition of feminism that is useful both in that it comes from a Catholic and in that it fits well within a study

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4 In the vocabulary of Catholicism, the terms “Religious” or “women Religious” refer to those who are neither clergy nor laity, primarily nuns and sisters.
of “alternative visions” of spirituality and society and of the “active participation,” i.e., ritual and
pilgrimage, that seeks to use performance to make that vision a reality.

Schneiders defines feminism as “a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women’s
experiences of sexually-based oppression, that engages in a critique of patriarchy as an
essentially dysfunctional system, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and
actively seeks to bring this vision to realization” (7, italics added).\(^5\) This statement suggests that
my central claims about the pilgrimage to Rome – that it analyzes patriarchal oppression,
searches for alternative wisdom, imagines a visionary or newly orthodox interpretation of the
archive and theology “rooted in women’s experience,” and, through repertoiric performance,
embodies that “different reality” as a way to bring about the envisioned transformation – are
indeed key not only to the FutureChurch pilgrimage but to feminist spirituality writ large.

This overlap between feminism and spirituality is not surprising, though, given
Schneiders’s assertion that “feminism is not merely a cause or a project but a comprehensive
ideology, that is, a mentality or life stance that colors all of one’s commitments and activities”
(7). That is, those Catholic women who identify as feminist, i.e., Schenk and the other
pilgrimage planners, are inherently likely to create their pilgrimages, liturgies, and other rituals,
and to perform their spiritual identities, in ways that are “colored by” these feminist values.
Their feminism constitutes their gendered identity, which, as Butler pointed out, is not
preexisting but is constituted in conjunction with other factors, so that “it becomes impossible to

\(^5\) Despite what seem like insurmountable theological differences, there is a surprising amount of overlap between
Christian feminism and the more radical feminist spirituality described in chapters five and six. For Schüssler
Fiorenza, “the Goddess of radical feminist spirituality is not so very different from the God whom Jesus preached
and whom he called ‘Father.’ In ever new images of life, love, light, compassion, mercy, care, peace, service, and
community, the writings of the New Testament attempt to speak of the God of Jesus Christ, and of this God’s live-
giving power, the Holy Spirit” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 93). Similarly, Weaver writes that “Feminist
spirituality is both old and new, alive to ancient rhythms of the Goddess while willing to experiment with
spontaneous feminist rituals” (211). In fact, the key factor separating these two types of spiritual feminists is often
the relationship with the patriarchal church, not one’s image of divinity.
separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (4–5). In the same way, because these feminist women are religious, their activities and rituals will be “colored by” their spirituality, since this spiritual identity “it is something which permeates all human activities and experiences rather than being additional to them” (King 5). Therefore, this pilgrimage and other similar rituals are performances of identities that are inseparably gendered or concerned with gender (i.e., feminist) and spiritual.

For the same reason, it is not surprising or contradictory that these women’s values are embraced both as “feminist values” and as “spiritual values”; for example, just as “[s]pirituality can be described as a process of transformation and growth,” so too can feminism (King 5).

In an interesting turn, Schneiders then asserts that such feminism, and its related concern with injustices against women both within and outside the church, is not a secular or humanistic worldview imported into Catholicism, but is instead “indigenous to the Church itself” and stems directly from a vision of the Gospel (62). Schneiders asserts that

the enthusiastic embrace of the feminist agenda by twentieth-century Catholic women, especially women Religious and their former students, is rooted more deeply in the culture of Religious congregations and the schools for women they founded than in the liberal agenda of the secular women’s movement. From the latter these women took the tools of analysis and the strategies for action, but the basic commitment to full personhood in the image of Jesus Christ for themselves and all creatures emerged from their particular lived experience of the Gospel in the company of women. (81–82)

By framing feminist values as “rooted” in the culture and experiences of women Religious and, moreover, in the Gospel and a “basic commitment to […] the image of Jesus Christ,” Schneiders
implies that feminism, with its “critique of patriarchy” and “alternative vision,” is inherent to Catholic spirituality. She continues: “If feminism is defined as an intellectual, spiritual, and practical commitment to the full personhood of every human being and right relationship among all creatures, it must be espoused by Christians as a Gospel imperative” (122). That is, if these values are the natural outgrowth of a commitment to the Gospel, then they are more legitimate than those oppressive, patriarchal values that the Vatican claims as orthodox. With this in mind, the pilgrims to Rome (as well as Womenpriests and other Catholics who support women’s ordination) might suggest that their performances, which seem “alternative,” if not heretical, are actually more orthodox than the authoritative voices that seek to silence them.

The Declaration against Women’s Ordination

Women’s ordination is one of the central issues with which spiritual feminists, particularly Catholics, are now concerned; besides the question of ordination itself, this debate is also important in what it reveals about the nature and purpose of the priesthood and the nature and representation of women and of God. Here, those “authoritative voices” with which women, as they seek to constitute their alternative identities through performance, find themselves in conflict are epitomized and informed by several documents issued or affirmed by the Vatican.

In 1976, the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the *Inter Insigniores*, or the “Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood.”

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6 This document was, at least in part, a response to the Anglican Communion’s 1968 decision that arguments both for and against women’s ordination were “inconclusive” and to the subsequent ordination of Anglican women priests, a decision which followed over fifty years’ of debate and study on the issue. The Anglican province of Hong Kong began ordaining women in 1971, eleven women were “illegally” ordained in Philadelphia in 1974, the Anglican Church of Canada authorized women’s ordination in 1975, and in 1976 – the same year as the Vatican Declaration – the General Convention of the Episcopal Church (USA) did the same. In contrast, the Catholic Church opened the discussion only long enough to declare that there was no discussion to be had, and immediately silenced the subject. Despite its best efforts, however, the Vatican cannot quite get the cat back into the bag.
This document declares: “the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination” (38). It then gives six reasons:

1. **Tradition**: “The Catholic Church has never” ordained women (38).

2. **“The attitude of Christ”**: Jesus did not call any women to be part of “the Twelve” (39).

3. **“The practice of the apostles”**: The early church apostles did not allow women to preach (40).

4. **“Permanent value” of Paul’s example**: Paul’s prohibition against women’s teaching reflects “the divine plan of creation” (i.e., male headship), not any cultural or personal bias (41–42).

5. **“The mystery of Christ”**: Because the priest acts *in persona Christi*, he is a “sacramental sign” of Christ. “[T]here would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man […] and this fact, while not implying an alleged natural superiority of man over woman, cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation: it is, indeed, in harmony with the entirety of God’s plan as God himself has revealed it.” Further, according to the “nuptial mystery” of God’s covenant, “we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man” (43–44).

6. **“The ministerial priesthood illustrated by the mystery of the Church”**: The priesthood is neither a human right nor a right of baptism, and no one can choose it; God chooses His priests (46). That is, “the priesthood is a calling, and women are not called to it.” (Raab 28)

By calling upon unbroken tradition, the examples of Christ and Paul, and God’s “divine plan,” the Declaration seeks to situate its position as fully orthodox and unquestionably legitimate.

However, many, including the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the Catholic Theological Society of America, have challenged the Vatican’s position. Inspired by the values of feminist spirituality, Catholic feminists also analyze the Declaration’s ideas and traditions as
inherently oppressive. They first seek out alternative wisdom, particularly Christ’s establishment of the equality of all, and then risk new interpretations of the tradition of priesthood. Because women’s lived experiences affirm that Christ’s radical equality is central to the meaning of the Gospel, they suggest that this Gospel vision is the “attitude of Christ” that should be followed, despite any traditions that seek to squelch it. Similarly, as is the case in FutureChurch’s pilgrimage, they search out and performatively re-member the history of those women who were leaders in the first centuries of church history, then suggest that church does have a tradition of ordaining women to priestly leadership roles, and that this lost tradition should take precedence over a tradition that oppresses women. They also suggest that all persons can bear “natural resemblance” to Christ by imaging his love for all and care for “the least of these” – Christ-like traits more central to his mission than his gender – and that this is confirmed by the Christ-like ministries and identities that women are already performing (as pastors, through sharing the sacraments in house churches, or by engaging in other “priestly” duties). Strengthened by a belief that Christ’s example of equality and the ongoing, transformative work of the Holy Spirit are more legitimate than the Vatican’s oppressive tradition and patriarchal interpretation, they seek to transform the Church through their performances as Catholics whose gendered, spiritual identities are shaped by a radical Gospel vision, not the hierarchy’s patriarchal distortions.

The official position on women’s ordination in the Catholic Church has not changed in the intervening years; in 1994, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter titled “On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone,” which definitively declared that the Catholic Church does not have the authority to ordain women. This statement was confirmed as part of the deposit of faith.

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7 The Declaration defends against this idea by stating that “A few heretical sects in the first centuries, especially Gnostic ones, entrusted the exercise of the priestly ministry to women: this innovation was immediately noted and condemned by the Fathers” (38); the evidence explored by FutureChurch in Rome suggests that these women were neither few nor heretical, and that the Fathers’ condemnation came not immediately but in the fourth century, when church structure was centralized and codified according to patriarchy and political power, not Gospel equality.
and was included in the Code of Canon Law, which requires full assent on pain of loss of full communion with the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed in 2006 that women cannot become priests because the original apostles were male.

Some organizations and their leaders, including the Women’s Ordination Conference and Roman Catholic Women Priests, risk excommunication by continuing to seek women’s ordination and to support those women who are “illegally” ordained. Many others, such as FutureChurch, have approached the issue less directly. For these women, their criticisms of the Declaration’s position cannot yet be added to the archive of Church orthodoxy and doctrine because the Declaration’s position was declared “infallible” and not open to debate – essentially establishing a “gag order” forbidding any further discussion of the topic. Instead, they use the tools of the repertoire to work against this oppressive, but authoritarian, archive. For example, women who serve in pastoral or “priestly” roles perform their identity in a way that tacitly challenges the Vatican position, even if they do not say so explicitly. Other groups, such as FutureChurch, use ritual to re-member women’s past leadership and to restore women leader’s histories to the repertoire and, whenever possible, to the official archive as well.

Because FutureChurch’s website, particularly its “Celebrating Women Witnesses” liturgies, visibly perform support for women’s leadership, I assumed that the organization actively supported women’s ordination as well. However, when I asked Sister Schenk if that was the case, her answer was complicated. The ordination of married priests is open for debate, but “on the women’s issue, that’s a little more checkered of a trajectory….” After the Pope’s “definitive statement” silenced the young organization’s ability to “talk openly” about and advocate for the possibility of women’s ordination, Catholics who were using FutureChurch’s resources asked, “the church has said we can’t talk about this, so what can we do now?”
FutureChurch has therefore focused on learning about and educating others about women leaders in scripture and church history, a move that clearly challenges the Vatican’s claims to an “unbroken tradition” without ever quite saying so out loud.

On the other hand, FutureChurch does support discussion of women’s ordination, including through petitions to the Vatican to open the conversation on ordaining women deacons. Schenk stated that FutureChurch’s policy on discussing women’s ordination is modeled on the Catholic Theological Society of America’s statement that the Declaration “did not meet any criteria that we’ve ever had in the church” for a teaching to be considered infallible; thus, FutureChurch believes that “we should continue to be able to discuss the possibility” of women fulfilling all the priesthood ministries. Slipping momentarily into stronger terms, she suggested that the Pope’s “definitive teaching” (and the threat of sanction that accompanies it) is a “transparent ruse to strong-arm people to stop talking about” this issue, and that the Church leadership “finally had to acknowledge that it was not heresy if you continued to believe that women should be ordained.” “Maybe it’s not heresy after all” hardly sounds like firm spiritual ground on which to stand, so Schenk and many other faithful Catholics must trust in the validity of their unorthodox interpretations, alternative identity performances, transformative visions of the Gospel, repertoiric performances, and lived experiences of spirituality and redemption.

Reform and Ambiguity: Living in the Space between Conformity and Schism

Although there is a wide spectrum of feminist Christians, ranging from those who accept the church as-is to those who have left it altogether, most women who are affiliated with the Women-Church network fall somewhere in the middle. Their feminist spirituality is marked by
(and embraces) ambiguity. Specifically, they remain a part of the church, instead of ceding from it, but engage in criticism and conversation instead of conforming to existing church orthodoxies. Such a position of indeterminacy is challenged by opposition from both sides. Their spirituality is challenged from within the church by those “claiming to be representatives of an immutable orthodoxy”; according to such holders of the “orthodox” faith, those who attempt to work outside this orthodoxy by imaging God in feminine terms or according to women’s experience are “heretical,” and have “ceased to be Christians at all” (Ruether, “Defecting” 251). On the other hand, post-Christians or those who embrace Goddess-worship may see the Christian church as irredeemably patriarchal, ruled by an evil system that has repressed women and earth-healing spirituality for thousands of years. According to them, women who remain in the Church cannot help but support the oppressors. While the first group insists that these feminists cannot legitimately claim Christianity, the second group demands that they recognize the “inconsistencies” of their position and cease advocating for an inherently corrupt system.

Despite these challenges, these feminist Christians insist upon their right to, as Ruether puts it, “defect in place”: to be in critical but loving dialogue with the church and its traditions. Instead of accepting polarizing options, they “create a third option to the choice between conformity and schism, to live in conscious ambiguity” (Watson 57). This “third option” is to recognize the importance of Christian faith but at the same time to seek out new symbols and alternative forms of embodying spirituality; these Christian feminists often describe their position “between conformity and schism” in terms of transformation or reformation. Instead of seeing such “conscious ambiguity” as an inconsistency to be resolved, these women recognize that such ambiguity, being “both-and” or “reforming from within,” can be powerful and even

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8 Indeed, it is not uncommon for critics to describe feminist spirituality conferences or writers as “goddess-worshiping,” “idol-worshiping,” “witches,” or “pagans” because they refer to God in feminine terms.
transformative. Indeed, “it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformation takes place; in fact, without such areas, transformation would be impossible” (Kenneth Burke, qtd. in Ross 64).

Moreover, these women’s use of ritual is a particularly effective way to respond to and live with ambiguity. Unlike the hierarchical and binary logic that often governs the archive, ritual works in a mode of paradox to allow “both/and” to exist simultaneously (i.e., the present and the future or the real and the ideal). As these women reject polarizing options and use ritual to negotiate their position of ambiguity, they discover that “those who embrace both sides of an apparent contradiction often will be nearer the full truth than those who surrender one or the other facet in favor of an artificial consistency” (Slaatte xiv). In this way, these women claim that they can be and manifest the church without blindly conforming to its structures and traditions.

What is most significant about positioning oneself in order to reform from within is that it allows these feminists, as Christians, to claim that their vision is not a secular idea imposed from outside, but is a legitimate part of Christian orthodoxy, directly reflective of or inspired by the Gospel vision of equality. For example, Schüessler Fiorenza describes her work as “of the ‘reconstructive reformist’ type – a type that draws its theological power, however, not from ‘secular’ (whatever that means) feminism but from the Christian tradition of the basileia, the vision of G-d’s alternative world, a vision of justice, human dignity, equality, and salvation for all” (Discipleship 10). Similarly, according to Ruether, women-church notes that Jesus was “an advocate of justice, including justice for women,” and “claims the original foundations of Christianity as in line with a feminist tradition and calls on the historical churches to reform themselves in order to be authentically faithful to the one they claim as their founder”

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9 “Since our language is not capable of adequately expressing the Divine, making all our names and titles for G-d insufficient, I seek to indicate this theological insight by writing the standard designation of the Divine in a ‘broken’ form rather than to adopt the lengthy ‘Goddess/God’ or the unpronounceable ‘God/ess’ spelling advocated by Rosemary Radford Ruether” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 10, n. 13).
(“Defecting” 250). In both of these statements and many others like them, Christian feminists insist not just in their right to remain in the church, but in the validity of their transformative visions as *more legitimately Christ-like* than the patriarchal structure they seek to reform.

Standing in a place that is understood as *fully legitimate* in its claim to Christian orthodoxy, these feminists then claim “the right and authority to define and claim biblical religions” (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship* 2). First, they claim the spiritual authority of the Gospel, which they see as a vision of equality. That is, the “liberating power” of the Gospel does not belong solely to those Christians who claim to be “representatives of an immutable orthodoxy,” as Ruether put it; instead, all those who have been transformed by the Gospel have a claim to spiritual authority. Because of this equal claim to orthodoxy, Schüssler Fiorenza insists, Christian feminists may not give up their religious authority to define biblical religion and the Christian church. We must never abandon our religious power to articulate a feminist religious vision of justice and liberation. Hence in this cartography of struggle, I seek to assert the power of feminist theological naming to transform patriarchal religions, a power that for centuries has been stolen from us and today is threatened again in various ways. (*Discipleship* 3)

That is, these Christian feminists claim “the authority of the gospel” to name and define their religious vision as legitimate because they see it as in line with the Gospel vision, because they recognize its liberating power, and because the very “power of naming” is inseparable from the liberation that the gospel requires.

These women also claim “the authority of our common but different experiences” (*Discipleship* 234). In Schüssler Fiorenza’s most famous statement, “We women are church, we always have been church, and we always will be church. Whether we are ordained or not we are
called and empowered to minister in women-church” (*Discipleship* 234). This phrasing is important: women are not *in* or *part of* the church, as if the church existed separately from women; neither are women *the* church, as if men are not. Instead, through the performative power of speech, naming women’s communities as church *makes* them church; the statement does what it says. Furthermore, to insist that women *are* church, a community of redemption, “means that the traditional, patriarchal church can no longer claim to be the sole representation of church, let alone a realization of the dynamic reality of the *ekklesia*” (Watson 55).

In naming their own experiences, women acknowledge their power and their being in the image of God. By naming themselves as those who are church, women claim their power to name the church as the space where such naming of their own experiences and of the Triune God as being-in-life-giving-relation can take place. (Watson 2)

Naming the place where one’s lived experiences are validated as reflective of and in relation to God as “church” is a significant move; it celebrates the goodness of human life, women’s experiences, and all parts of physical existence, and it “raises up the inherent sacrality of all life, but especially of women, children, and the most vulnerable” (Ross 46). As will become clear in the following pages, naming women’s experiences as sacramental and God-filled is central to women’s ritualizing; so is understanding any “community of redemption” as theologically church, even if it is not a church (building) or the church (hierarchy). Performances of liturgies, pilgrimages, and other rituals are ways of exploring the “borderlands” of Christian theology and of embracing these alternative visions not only as *also valid*, but even as *more legitimate than traditional orthodoxy* – that is, “neo-orthodox” or a return to a more valid theology.10

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10 Despite (or perhaps because of) the protestations of those from within the church who deny these women’s claim to religious authority and legitimacy, Christian feminists often frame and speak of their vision of equality as
FOUR AIMS OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Inspired by this vision of equality, embracing the goodness of lived experience, and confident of its prophetic role in transforming the church (and the world) by redeeming it from patriarchal corruption, Christian feminist theology has several key tasks. According to Elizabeth Johnson, feminist theology “critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches for alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women’s lives” (29). To this list I add a fourth: working toward transformation. I discuss these four aims here because they use performance and the repertoire, and because they are central to my analysis of this theology, especially as reflected in FutureChurch’s pilgrimage.

Feminist Theology Critically Analyzes Inherited Oppressions

This feminist theology first analyzes the institutional church’s orthodoxy – its interpretations of sacred text and tradition – and finds that orthodoxy illegitimate where it reflects sexism. Sexism is judged sinful in that “it is contrary to God’s intent, that it is a precise and pervasive breaking of the basic commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’ (Lv 19:18; Mt 22:39). It affronts God by defacing the beloved creature created in the image of God” (Johnson 9). Furthermore, “[s]exism as structural sin encompasses the dehumanizing trends, injustices, and discriminations of institutions, the theology and symbol system that legitimize these institutions, and the collective and personal ‘false consciousness’ created by sexist

“prophetic.” A female Episcopal priest stated, “I see women in a prophetic role, questioning the patriarchal foundation of institutional Christianity” (qtd. in Raab 219). Schneiders refers to “the gospel call to prophetic engagement in the transformation of the world” (122). Even the Women’s Ordination Conference honors “those women who are for us Prophetic Figures,” celebrating them as “modeling new shapes to the lives we choose to lead” (qtd. in Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 233). Echoing the unpopular and highly “unorthodox” Jewish prophets who called ancient Israel to repent of its corruption, and aligning themselves with the biblical prophets Miriam, Deborah, the women of Corinth, and Philip’s four daughters, to claim a prophetic role is to imply that the church structure is corrupted and in need of transformation. It is also to claim that God has called women to a “prophetic role” that authorizes them to speak, name, define, and interpret the gospel in visionary, if unpopular, ways.
institutions and ideologies and internalized in socialization and education” (Schüessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship* 140). This sexism is recognized in practices ranging from the erasure of women from the lectionary to the glorification of female virginity. It is also seen in the notion of “complimentarity,” according to which men and women are essentially different in nature and role (and according to which, women are excluded from the priesthood because it is not in their “nature” to serve in this way; they have other gifts, such as motherhood). In response, feminist theology analyzes “women’s experiences of and their struggles against oppression in church and society” and, grounded in a gospel vision of equality, acts as “a critical theology of liberation,” critically analyzing “the oppressive sexist structures of Christian church and tradition while at the same time rediscovering the liberating traditions and elements of Christian faith” (Schüessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship* 139). Here again, this feminist theology positions itself as more legitimate than the church orthodoxy it criticizes, in that it is theologically aligned with the Christian tradition of liberation, not with an oppressive, man-made structure. What is also remarkable about this move is that it rejects the sole interpretive authority claimed by the archive (e.g., scripture, history, books of theology) where that authority has codified and legitimized oppression. Instead, it accords authority to experience and embodiment, thereby legitimizing egalitarian, non-oppressive theologies and identity performances.

Sexism and oppression are also recognized not only in the “androcentric dynamics” of scriptures and traditions, but also in the institutional church’s hierarchical and patriarchal structure, structures “that perpetuate patriarchal sexism as well as racism, classism, and colonialism in and outside the church” (Schüessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship* 254). A structure of the world based on hierarchies is understood as oppressive because it divides the human race into pairs according to superiority and inferiority – a concept that is antithetical to a radical equality
in which there is neither “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Instead, such structures are built on the “paradigmatic dualism: male-female. In each of the pairs one member is ‘masculine,’ that is, autonomous and self-determining, endowed with power and agency that are exercised upon the ‘feminine’ member, which is owned and other-determined, powerless and dependent” (Schneiders 24). For Christian feminism, any structure based on this worldview is sinful against God’s established equality and oppressive to women. Indeed, traditional Church structure is based in such divisions: between God and humanity, the priesthood and the laity, and the priest and the congregation. Similarly, traditional sacramental theology “operates out of an implicit, and sometimes quite explicit, set of conceptions that assumes an ‘essential’ and ‘natural’ quality to gender. [W]omen as a whole, because of our capacity to give birth, and because of the perceived ‘order of nature,’ are given a place on the margins of, or outside, the sacraments” (Ross 11). According to Raab, one of the reasons why the Church is guarding against women’s ordination is because it would reveal these dualisms as constructed, not biologically or naturally inherent (234). That is, if the ruling that women cannot be priests due to “complimentary” gender roles is shown to be faulty, the “masculine” and “feminine” dualisms that organize Church hierarchies may begin to collapse. To that end, performing gendered and spiritual identities, being church, and creating rituals in ways that are egalitarian and collaborative, not hierarchical, make the Church’s hierarchies visible, and reveal them as constructed. That is, embodying the ideal, egalitarian church of the future (often called “women-church”) performatively makes that transformation possible.

Central to feminist theology’s analysis of inherited oppressions is its statement that “patriarchy is rejected as God’s will” (Ruether, Women-Church 57). In its place, these women begin to perform an alternative vision of the world and their identities within it, one based on
radical equality. This “imaginative change is not simply a modification of ideas or policies. It is a new world construction, a different, affectively loaded, wholistic vision of reality” (Schneiders 23). That is, this vision is a new way of seeing the world and performing one’s identity within it, not through “the patriarchal imagination” but according to a newly legitimized, alternative theology, thus transforming the church by analyzing what is, expanding legitimizing authority beyond the archive to include the repertoire, and performatively imagining what “could be.”

Feminist Theology Searches for Alternative Wisdom and Suppressed History

If Christian feminist theology’s first task is to critique those structures that, despite being authoritative, are oppressive, its second task is to seek out “more orthodox” alternatives. In doing so, it responds to the oppression of sexism by remembering, a key tool of the repertoire. Such remembering is necessary because women have been “erased” from so much of patriarchal religion, a “loss of historical memory” that steals women’s “religious power of self-naming” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 3). Oppression often works through suppression – depriving a people of its history by erasing or trivializing it – and so an “important step towards liberation is to reclaim the stories in history and culture that have been lost or suppressed by the oppressors” (Sainsbury 256). This reclamation often works through performances of the repertoire, which “make visible those social actors, scenarios, and power relations that have been overlooked and disappeared” (Taylor 278). This performed remembering takes two primary forms: reclaiming early Christianity’s egalitarian vision and rediscovering women leaders in the early church.

The “alternative wisdom” that feminist theology seeks out is based in the “radical equality” of the gospels, Jesus’ ministry, and the early church. They “see the egalitarian vision of Christian origins as the key paradigm which needs to be dis-covered as existent throughout the
history of Christianity in order to be re-covered so that it may in turn transform the Church” (Watson 104–105). In contrast with the hierarchical structure they criticize, these feminists frame their alternative vision as a “discipleship of equals.” Because this “egalitarian vision” is understood as central to Jesus’ ministry, the implication is that theologies and spiritualities based in it are more legitimate than a theology based in patriarchal divisions, and thus are well suited to transform the church. This “alternative wisdom” is not just held up as an idea or archived as fixed doctrine, but is embodied and performed by women who claim to “be church.”

The recovery and reclamation of the history of women is an equally important response to oppression. Indeed, when Conn asks, “How can we promote this discipleship of equals, this new Christianity beyond patriarchy?” her first answer is “Interpreting the Past” (2). She writes:

Christian women’s and men’s spiritual growth requires knowledge of women’s history. It is necessary, first of all, in order to satisfy the basic human need for meaning and identity. Because meaning requires imagination, all of us need an accurate picture of women’s own past and role models to support an inclusive vision for the future. Second, knowledge of this history promotes action. When women perceive their condition as deprivation, history demonstrates that they act to change this condition. (2)

Conn suggests that this search for suppressed history is an important task of feminist theology because it is necessary for several tasks: spiritual growth, formation of identity, creation of a vision by which to shape future transformation, and active work against patriarchal oppression.

Recovering this history has also been FutureChurch’s primary tool for promoting women’s equality. When Pope John Paul II silenced the conversation on women’s ordination, FutureChurch began other projects to advance women’s roles, including studies of the history of
women in early Christianity. Although well educated in theology, Schenk and other FutureChurch leaders were surprised to learn about how important women such as Mary Magdalene, Susanna, and Joanna were to Jesus’ ministry. Realizing that other Catholic women were also uninformed about Mary Magdalene, who proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection to the other disciples and who was almost certainly not a prostitute, FutureChurch designed a prayer service “celebrating who she really was” (Schenk). At the first celebration of this service in 1996, Schenk describes, “women were in tears. […] That’s when I knew we were in something way deeper.” Encouraged by this response, FutureChurch began creating its “Celebrating Women Witnesses” educational resources and prayer services. Importantly, this strategy is not simply informative, but encourages women not only to remember women’s history, but to re-member it, embodying “women witnesses” through performance. As women use ritual to perform their connection to these “spiritual ancestors,” the transformative power of ritual comes into play: the past (recovered women’s history) is brought into the present, and the ideal future (the church’s valuation of all its history, not just men’s) is made real.

Recovering these “women witnesses” does more than simply reveal that women “were there too”; such historiography also is a valuable “search for roots, for solidarity with our foresisters, and finally for the memory of their sufferings, struggles, and power as women” (Schüssler Fiorenza, “In Search” 35). Claiming “solidarity” with these “foresisters” through performance and ritual helps contemporary women to shape, perform, and legitimize their own identities as leaders in the church. Their legitimate roles as women in the church may be limited

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11 “Mary Magdalene is the primary witness to the fundamental data of the early Christian faith: she witnessed the life and death of Jesus, his burial and his resurrection. She was sent to the disciples to proclaim the Easter kerygma. Therefore, Bernard of Clairvaux correctly calls her ‘apostle to the apostles’” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 77).

12 Performatively re-membering “spiritual ancestors” is a key commonality between the pilgrimages I study, but it also highlights a significant difference: the Catholic pilgrims are attempting to recover a “real” history (although they use imagination to do so), while the goddess-seekers acknowledge that their “history” is partly mythological.
by patriarchal orthodoxy until they remember and embrace alternative wisdom, including the fact that that “Christian faith is based upon the witness and proclamation of women. As Mary Magdalene was sent to the disciples to proclaim the basic tenets of Christian faith, so women today may rediscover by contemplating her image the important function and role that they have for the Christian faith and community” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 77). Claiming the early church’s women disciples, teachers, prophets, and other leaders as “spiritual ancestors,” and re-membering those women and their leadership through performance, empowers contemporary women and transforms those who face oppression because gives them a history, a lineage of apostolic and Spirit-filled succession, alternative models for their performances as Christian women, and a way to remember – and re-member – a non-hierarchical faith.13

**Feminist Spirituality Risks New Interpretations of Tradition**

Challenged by a vision of spirituality that overcomes patriarchal and sexist oppression and encouraged by the example of women leaders in church history, feminist spirituality’s next task is to risk new interpretations of established traditions – that is, to re-write “orthodoxy” through performance. Two such important new discourses of faith concern their use of liturgy and their belief in God’s immanence.14

In the past three decades, both feminist and traditional theologians have recognized liturgy “as a source for theological reflection” and “a fundamental site for understanding, interpreting, and configuring the Christian faith. These ‘liturgical’ theologians often summarize

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13 Christian feminists also see other women as “spiritual ancestors,” particularly mystics who imaged God in female terms: “the mystical tradition is especially empowering for feminists because it values experience, supports a continuing process of liberation, and demands an openness to new understandings of the divine nature and attributes. […] Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich – albeit in quite different ways – all provide the kind of support which can lead to liberation” (Weaver 191).

14 **Liturgy** refers to “those formal and communal acts in which sacramentality is ritualized” (Ross 31 n.25)
their claim by an oscillating shorthand version of a patristic axiom: *lex orandi, lex credendi*, ‘the law of praying is the law of believing’; ‘worship shapes faith’; ‘as you pray, so you believe’” (Berger 220). That is, liturgy, as a practice of the repertoire, constitutes, shapes, and embodies theology, spirituality, and even church orthodoxy. Notably, as Catherine Bell would point out, this liturgy does not just give shape to pre-existing theology, but actively constitutes it. As Butler puts it, “[t]he distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial” (192). Women’s liturgies are performances through which theology is constituted.

Although most mainstream theologians have not been attentive to women’s practices of liturgy and prayer, feminist theologians and liturgists have begun to explore the ways in which women’s liturgical performances constitute theology. Teresa Berger, herself a feminist liturgist, cites Susan A. Ross, who argues that “Both the official worship of the church and women-identified liturgies count as *lex orandi* to which theology has to be attentive” (Berger 221). That is, liturgy is significant because, through performance, it is able to “shape faith” and to constitute theology. Berger also cites Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, which focuses on “‘the current resurgence of women’s practices of memory’” (Johnson, qtd. in Berger 221). According to Johnson, liturgy is an embodied, performative *practice of memory*, a repertoirc praxis, and a way of remembering and physically re-membering those women who ritualized and met with God in similar ways.

Feminist theology also reinterprets tradition through its ideas about God’s immanence. Because this spirituality involves an intimate relationship with the divine, there is often a focus on God’s *immanence* instead of God’s *transcendence*. In comparing ritualizing women from many different faiths, Northup notes that “[t]he one theme that seems to arise most consistently is that whatever the numinous is, it is immanent rather than transcendent. Worshiping women
appear to favor overwhelmingly a vision of indwelling divinity or power” (23). This “immanence” is often reflected in images of “God in relationship”: “Feminist spirituality, inside and outside the Roman Catholic church has been characterized by connectedness, a modern expression of the way of affirmation that seeks to explore and experience the supportive, nurturing, involved God/ess who desires union through relationship” (Weaver 181–82). This “risky” understanding of God allows for a sacramental theology that focuses on “the inherent goodness of physical reality” and a “greater valuation of the ‘things of the world,’ including sexuality” (Ross 97–98). Recognizing physicality and sexuality as sacred revelations of God’s immanence allows these theologians to claim the female body as holy and able to represent God; this expands the “legitimate” identity performances available to women. In turn, women’s embodied representations of God through priesthood and performances of the Eucharist have the power to transform people’s images of God. As one Episcopal woman priest explained,

I believe the woman at the altar enlarges people’s understandings and imaginings about God. In prayers and in celebration, the ordained person is representative of the people to God and God to the people. If the image is always male, God is represented as only male. As women are included symbolically as representative people, the image of God is larger. The feminine becomes more than the Spirit dimension. Sonship begins to include daughters and the understanding of all of us as children becomes stronger. (qtd. in Raab 11)

Because God’s intimacy and immanence affirms the sanctity of the body (particularly the female body), human relationships, and the created world, it leads to a different performance of one’s own spiritual identity as it is in relationship with the divine.

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15 “God/ess is Rosemary Radford Ruether’s term for the fullness of divinity, a divine person that is undivided even though the term combines masculine and feminine words for the divine, God and Goddess” (Weaver 255, n.7).
**Feminist Theology Works towards Transformation and Equality**

As they shape their identity performances in response to these values, goals, and theologies, these Christian feminists are not only constituting their identities in the present, but also working toward *future* transformation. Because ritual and performance are transformative, they are particularly useful ways of working toward such change. For example, by performing their spiritual identities in ways that reflect the hoped-for emancipation of the church from patriarchy and hierarchy, these women are transformatively bringing the future into the present.

This is important because feminist theology’s fourth goal is the future transformation of the church. “[T]he name for this liberated humanity would then no longer be ‘Women-Church,’ but simply ‘Church’; that is, the authentic community of exodus from oppression that has been heralded by the traditions of religious and social liberation but, until now, corrupted by reversion to new forms of the *ecclesia* of patriarchy” (Ruether, *Women-Church* 61). To effect that transformation, Christian feminist theology works to analyze the oppressive power of the archive and break down hierarchies; seeks out the alternative wisdom of radical gospel equality and recover women’s history through ritual and repertoiric performance; risks new interpretations by using liturgical performance to ritually re-imagine divinity as immanent, God-in-relationship; and celebrates the goodness of the created world through embodied performance – including ritual, liturgy, identity creation, and pilgrimage – by reflecting women’s presence, lives, and bodies in liturgy, worship, and God-imagery. In all of these ways, this performed theology and these alternative identity performances suggest the necessity of renewing the priesthood according to an egalitarian pattern that is open to all, including women. Feminist spirituality is, above all, seeking the future transformation of the church.
FEMINIST THEOLOGY USES PERFORMANCE

As this discussion has revealed, one of the primary ways in which Christian feminists work toward these four aims is through performance, including liturgy, pilgrimage, and other rituals. Because many Christian feminists “are aware that ‘in many respects the most effective ritual criticism is the development of an alternate rite,’ their spirituality groups are demonstrating more interest in generating new rites – that is, in ritualizing – than in finding a place for themselves within old ones” (Northup 21). These “new rites” – women’s liturgies and rituals – have five central characteristics: they “ritualize relationships that empower women; they are collaborative, and not the product of experts; they serve to critique patriarchal liturgies; they draw on a distinct repertoire; and they produce events, not texts” (Ross 220–21). The second and third characteristics directly connect these rituals to feminist spirituality’s other work in critiquing patriarchal traditions and in replacing hierarchical or authoritative relationships with egalitarian, collaborative ones. The remaining three characteristics are also significant descriptors of performance: because they “ritualize relationships that empower women,” such rituals often reflect women’s lived experiences; in that they draw on a “repertoire” and “produce events, not texts,” they work through the repertoire and critique the archive. As such, they are particularly vital to my investigation of women’s identity formation through performance.

As is the case with much of women’s ritualizing in general, these women’s rituals and liturgies tend to reflect women’s lived experience, and highlight “those elements that arise out of their gendered experience” (Northup 3). As ritualizers create “women’s rituals,” however, they are not working out of some universal “women’s experience,” but responding to women’s

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16 This “need for prayer, ritual, and communities of faith and nurture is shared not only by Christian feminists, but also by those who seek to revive the old religions of the Goddess. Feminist witches such as Starhawk have typically written […] handbooks for community formation, prayer, and ritual. Jewish feminists are also seeking to reshape the community of prayer and study into vehicles for liberation from patriarchy” (Ruether, Women-Church 4).
specific experiences of marginalization and oppression. This happens in at least three different but interrelated ways. First, these liturgies are frequently characterized by imagery, language, and literature that imagines God in female terms and in ways that reflect women’s experiences and relationships; imaging God as Mother or as Sophia / Wisdom are the most common, but by no means the only, ways of doing so. This reflects the liturgical importance of performative speech: as feminist theologies have insisted, calling God “He” and “Father” makes “the image of God” male, and so excludes women from performing their identities as “images of God.”

Second, ritualizers frequently use objects or symbols that are common to women’s daily lives, often including food (bread, wine, milk, or fruit), textiles or clothing, or elemental forces such as fire and water. In her definition of “spirituality” as “Christian religious experience as such,” Schneiders suggests that because it is experience, “whatever enters into the actual living of this on-going integrating self-transcendence is relevant [to spirituality], whether it be mystical, theological, ethical, psychological, political or physical” (qtd. in Getty 37). In this way, whatever enters into women’s “actual living,” no matter how physical or common, is relevant to their development of spirituality and their performances of spiritual identity, and so are useful tools for ritual. In this way, women constitute their spiritual identities as part of and integral to, not separate from, their daily existence. This tactic allows women to perform their identities in wholistic ways: one’s gender and role (e.g mother or nun) are inseparable from one’s spirituality.

Third, women’s rituals are often created to celebrate, mourn, or otherwise “set aside” as “sacred” the events that are particular to women’s physicality (miscarriage, menopause, etc.) or to their formation of identity (such as graduation or divorce). This is not to suggest that women ritualize some “universal women’s experience”; on the contrary, “There are no universally valid images of the relationship between God and women. [The ritual process of] Re-imagining
expresses experiences and expectations that are specific for each individual woman”’ (Denise J. J. Dijk, qtd. in Northup 4). However, women often do ritualize those specific, individual experiences. These rituals are “ways of deliberately inserting the embodied presence of women into the liturgical life of the church. This presence is not so much the symbol of the (absent) presence of God, a way of thinking that stresses the ‘otherness’ of God, but rather the intentional assertion of God’s presence here, in the bodies of women” (Ross 167). Through ritual, therefore, women’s lives, experiences, and even bodies reflect ideas about God and are relevant to their formation of spirituality, theology, and identity.

Such liturgies and rituals work by engaging in ritual, storytelling, and other acts of the repertoire; in doing so, they also challenge the authority of the archive (directly, e.g., by using inclusive language or re-interpreting archaeological evidence, or indirectly, e.g., by celebrating embodiment). The archive – text, word, and doctrine – is privileged in institutions such as the Church, in that text ensures uniformity of belief and practice; the more stable this archive is, the more powerful and unquestionable its authority. (Although worship and religious life are often embodied through physical performances such as the Eucharist, those rituals that are strictly codified are essentially archival in that their form is established and seeks to be unchanging.) Such an extreme privileging of the archive as the ultimate authority leaves very little room for repertoiric performances such as alternative ritualizing and liturgical creation or for the embodied valuation of lived experience and physicality. It is also particularly problematic when the archive’s textual orthodoxy and doctrine is understood as flawed. Therefore, Christian feminists often turn to the repertoire to challenge text’s claim to absolute authority and orthodoxy. As this chapter has suggested, two overlapping types of repertoiric performances
stand out: “reclaiming” community and heritage by remembering erased women, and
“reclaiming” theology and spirituality by creating alternative liturgies and rituals.

First, as Diana Taylor suggests, performances of remembering are particularly important for those groups of people whose histories and stories have been largely suppressed. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, recovering “women’s heritage as church” is necessary because

If the oppression of a people is total because it has neither an oral nor a written history, then the reconstruction of such a history of suffering and resurrection, of struggle and survival, is an important means to empower women and other nonpersons. It can correct the deformation of our historical consciousness that has eliminated women’s and other nonpersons’ victimizations and struggles from our ecclesial memory. (Discipleship 329)

The “people” or culture group here is Christian women, and indeed, this group has almost no “oral or written history,” particularly for the first seventeen or so centuries of its existence. Because this, the erasure of women’s history is almost invisible; it seems “natural” that the history of the church is almost exclusively a history of men, thereby legitimizing and naturalizing continued erasure and victimization. Although a few women’s histories can be recovered, as feminist historiographers and ecclesiologists are working to do, these recovered histories rarely become part of the orthodox archive. Instead, they are remembered and transferred within this culture group through repertoiric performance, such as storytelling, liturgy, and ritualizing. Such performance is also the only way in which the vast majority of women’s church history can be re-membered. For example, ritualizing in memory of

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17 This statement bears an interesting resemblance to Butler’s work in Precarious Life (London: Verso, 2004). For Butler, “nonpersons” are those people who do not fit within the normalized conceptions of “personhood” (in an extreme example, intersexed persons cannot be clearly defined as male or female and therefore cannot be identified as “persons”). In light of this, Schüssler Fiorenza’s women are “nonpersons” because the category of “Christian person” has been normalized as “male”; thus, women cannot see themselves within this category.
“anonymous women,” as FutureChurch does, and other performances of imaginative “remembering” help women to remember that they do have a history, even if that history is now almost completely invisible. These strategies also work to make visible the fact of erasure – to reveal its existence and its constructedness. When archival history has been erased, repertoiric performances are valuable transmitters of memory because they “make visible those social actors, scenarios, and power relations that have been overlooked and disappeared over and over again” (Taylor 278). Such rituals can begin to restore this history of “struggle and survival” to women (and restore women to history), and work against the oppression of erasure.

Such rituals of remembering also allow women to connect their worship and spirituality to the worship and stories of their spiritual ancestors. The repertoiric performance of memory, or “the telling, repeating, and recording of “our” stories,’ puts people in touch with their communal history and allows them to integrate it into their worship in the present. This kind of remembering makes present those who have gone before and allows women to draw on their experience, wisdom, and power” (Northup 35, quoting Maria Harris). Feminist theologians consciously use ritual, liturgy, and identity performances in order to constitute theology and effect transformation; this reveals that they “take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (Taylor 26). Because they do so, they are able to identify a lack of having or knowing “‘our’ stories” as “oppression.” In response, they also recognize the power and value of remembering and retelling those stories: this repertoiric performance practice gives Christian women a “communal history” and, therefore, integrates them into this “community” of women, past and present. As Northup notes, re-membering this history does not simply give women a past; it also, perhaps more importantly, shapes and constitutes “their worship in the present,” i.e., their performance of gendered spiritual
identity. In part, performance of memory does so because it expands the range of “legitimate” performances that are available to Christian women by “draw[ing] upon” those spiritual ancestors’ “experience, wisdom, and power.” Identifying and re-membering one’s community of ancestors as “wise” and “powerful” transforms the ways in which these women can think about, image, and perform their identities as part of this community. Finally, such performance of re-membering spiritual ancestors also does the transformative work of ritual when it “makes present those who have gone before,” bringing the past into the present so as to transform the future.18

Second, Christian feminist performances often take the form of alternative liturgy or rituals. “As a theology of liberation, feminist theology subjects texts and traditions to a critical scrutiny for their emancipatory potential”; rejecting those “official” liturgical celebrations that exclude women’s stories and experiences, “women have turned to ‘unofficial’ religious practices, to ways of celebrating, mourning, and remembering significant events in their lives that are on no liturgical calendar” (Ross 27). Although these women remain within or identified with their “orthodox” church (primarily Roman Catholicism), they “feel forced by the patriarchy of that religion to seek separate women’s spaces in order to develop women’s liturgies and theology […] to empower themselves and other women” (Wessinger 6). By embracing repertoiric performance in this way, these women not only reclaim their “communal history”; they also create and embody an alternative theology. That is, while these liturgical performances may echo more orthodox rituals, they take new forms to shape alternative theologies:

18 Rituals of re-membering are also a means of reclaiming other traditions as legitimate, integral parts of history and as viable, alternative spiritual practices. For example, through ritual, feminist theology can reclaim the “alternative traditions of spirit-filled communities, like, for example, Montanists or Quakers, in which women participated more fully” but “which have often been excluded or declared heretical by the established church” (Watson 70).
Feminist liturgies play a very important role in feminist theory and practice. In feminist liturgical practice, reflection and liturgy go hand in hand, so the traditional distinction between sacramental and liturgical theology no longer holds firm. Liturgies are theology, in that they deliberately give expression to relationships with others, the world, and God, and in their intentional subversion of patriarchal liturgy. (Ross 31)

If “liturgies are theology,” then, despite being “alternative,” such worship practices can and do shape faith and reflect an understanding of God. My earlier point about J. L. Austin’s required “authority” applies here: as performatives, liturgies do not require the “authority” of being performed by a priest or according to existing forms in order to be effective or “felicitous.” The embodied performance constitutes theology and embodies spiritual identity – it works – with or without the requisite “authority.” As with pilgrimage, it is enough that these practices are shaped in and “cite” an established form (i.e., liturgy); as citational references, their form and purpose is legible, and so they can be read as legitimate ways of knowing God. Because the liturgies are not physical expressions of pre-existing ideas but in fact constitute theology through performance, they cannot be measured as a “true or false” embodiments of belief.

Such rituals are necessary to the development and performance of spirituality and theology. As Ruether puts it, “One needs not only to engage in rational theoretical discourse [i.e., the archive] about this journey; one also needs deep symbols and symbolic actions [i.e., the repertoire] to guide and interpret the actual experience of the journey from sexism to liberated humanity” (Ruether, Women-Church 3). Such repertoiric rituals do constitute theology and identity, are empowering and transformative, and are just as necessary a “way of knowing” as is the archive of “rational theoretical discourse.”
CHAPTER FOUR. FUTURECHURCH’S PILGRIMAGE TO ROME:

A PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

“Wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world,
what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

– Mark 14:9

In March 2007, seventeen Catholic pilgrims (all but one of them women) set off on a ten-day pilgrimage to Rome. There, as pilgrims often do, they “train[ed] flashlights, binoculars and cameras on the mosaics, frescoes and ruins […], keen to see all that they can see” (Patterson 12). However, unlike most of the many Catholics who visit Rome each year, these pilgrims are not there to pray in St. Peter’s Basilica or the Basilica of St. Paul, to tour the Vatican’s collection of Christian art and artifacts, to try to catch a glimpse of the Pope, or to attend High Mass in one of the city’s many churches. Instead, these pilgrims, led by the Cleveland-based organization FutureChurch, were there “to learn about early women officeholders in the Catholic Church” (“Rome Pilgrims”). To that end, they spent their time visiting other basilicas: those of St. Pudentiana and St. Praxedis, which honor two sisters who gathered and buried the broken bodies of early Christian martyrs. They sought out different museums, such as the Pio Christiani museum, which “houses wondrous 2nd-4th century sarcophagi richly adorned with sculpted biblical figures surrounding a prominent women leader depicted either alone or with her husband” (“Rome Pilgrims”). Instead of seeking out the Pope, they caught glimpses of the women who might be pictured preaching, being ordained, or sharing a Eucharist meal on ancient frescoes in the catacombs. And their most sacred ritual was held not in a church but in the Catacombs of Priscilla, where they shared “an informal liturgy of song and prayer complete with
a quasi-eucharistic meal, breaking off morsels of bread from rolls taken from breakfast and serving the bread to each other with a murmured invocation” (Patterson 12).

This “Journey of Discovery,” as it was titled, clearly cited the form and structure of a traditional Catholic pilgrimage, and so is readable as such. However, it was taken not by typical pilgrims – those seeking to confirm their belief in Catholic doctrine or to strengthen their faith – but by women who were willing to challenge and contradict official papal decrees and orthodox Church histories. In doing so, these pilgrims re-saw and re-interpreted archival materials according to different authorities; moreover, they engaged in embodied performances of the repertoire that Diana Taylor sees as valuable “way[s] of knowing,” most notably the bread-breaking ritual and other ways of re-membering their spiritual ancestors (xvi). As they performed these unorthodox rituals, they also performed their gendered and spiritual identities, and even their theology, in new ways. Because these embodiments were “not expressive but performative,” Judith Butler states, “then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (192). That is, because these rituals do not simply “reveal” the pilgrims’ existing identities but, in performative ways, constitute new identities, they are moments of transformation. By engaging in repertoiric performances that challenged the Vatican’s orthodox interpretation of church history, its oppressive limitations on women’s roles and identities, and its strict definitions of priestliness and bread-breaking, these pilgrims were able to, as Tom Driver describes it, “disorder and refashion” the status quo (132). That is, their performances constituted new ways of being Catholic women and of being “priestly.” However, although these performances were highly unorthodox, their citation of the “pilgrimage” form and their appeal to church history and theology (albeit a long-forgotten, half-hidden, and newly reinterpreted history) legitimized their “alternative” performances and situated them as orthodox.
The 2007 pilgrimage to Rome was the second such trip led by FutureChurch; a similar journey had been taken in April 2006. My analysis will refer to both pilgrimages together as one entity, “the FutureChurch pilgrimage,” as they were structurally quite similar. The first trip, taken from March 31–April 8, 2006, included thirty-one pilgrims and leaders (“Pilgrims Celebrate”). The March 13–22, 2007, trip included seventeen travelers. With the exception of one man who attended in 2007, all of the pilgrims and guides were women, and most or all were Catholic. While most, if not all, travelers were “at least ‘sympathetic’” to women’s ordination, this issue was not the primary reason why all of them joined the trip; a few women attended to join their mothers or friends, and “at least in one instance, [one of those daughters] was not at all sure about all of this [i.e., women’s ordination and leadership], but she got so turned on about it” by the end of the trip (Schenk). According to the “Journey of Discovery” brochure, the 2007 trip cost $2,635; travelers stayed in a guest house in central Rome run by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Both pilgrimages were co-led by Sister Chris Schenk, FutureChurch’s executive director, who served as the trips’ “spiritual director.” Her co-leader in 2006 was Dr. Dorothy Irvin, an active field archaeologist and theologian with a pontifical doctorate in Catholic Theology from the University of Tubingen, Germany. The 2007 “educational director” was Dr. Janet Tulloch, a specialist in early Christian images who holds a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Ottawa. Tulloch’s extensive research on the frescos in the catacombs of Petrus and Marcellinus can be found in the 2005 book A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity, which she co-authored with Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald. These educational directors were integral to the pilgrims’ experiences in Rome: each night they led a slide show lecture or study session on the sites the group would visit the next day. Because she was

1 A trip planned for 2008 was cancelled due to the recession; FutureChurch has received requests for a 2010 trip.
2 This included fourteen pilgrims (“13 women and one man”), as well as the the two leaders (Schenk and Tulloch) and one other, either the tour guide or Patterson herself (Patterson 10).
“determined that this would be a real pilgrimage, not an archaeological trip,” Schenk also led a reflection and prayer service at each site; these services were based on FurtureChurch’s “Celebrating Women Witnesses” materials (Schenk).

The “best loved sites” in 2006 included “the catacombs of Priscilla, the Basilica of St. Praxedis and the catacombs of Petrus and Marcellinus, though tours of the Vatican excavations, Ostia and Assisi were also highpoints” (“Pilgrims Celebrate”). Ostia is a fully excavated early Roman community located on the shores of the Mediterranean and is the site of the death of St. Monica, Augustine’s mother, who Tulloch described as “The good women leader who went from martyr’s tomb to martyr’s tomb with wine and water” (“Rome Pilgrims”). New sites added in 2007 included the church of St. Pudentiana, and the Museo Civiltà Romana (“Rome Pilgrims”). Another added site was the Pio Christiani Museum, where they studied the images of early women preachers and teachers, in the form of sarcophagi from the second to fourth centuries CE, which are “richly adorned with sculpted biblical figures surrounding a prominent women leader depicted either alone or with her husband. On three sarcophagi, women leaders are shown holding codices from which they explain, teach or preach beloved biblical stories from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures” (“Rome Pilgrims Explore”). They also visited some of the earliest house churches and learned about women’s leadership and key roles in the home, including in home-church worship, and about the influence of wealthy Christian women. At the Petrus and Marcellinus catacombs, “vibrant and rarely seen frescos give silent, compelling testimony to gender balanced leadership in early funerary rituals” (“Pilgrims Celebrate”). Such rarely studied evidence of important church leaders also made them aware of the many other women who left even fainter traces of their existence, and at St. Praxedis, the group prayed the
“Anonymous Women” prayer service, “systematically naming aloud women leaders in Church history whose stories are often hidden” (“Pilgrims Celebrate”).

My sources for analyzing these pilgrimages include FutureChurch’s descriptions in its media releases and newsletter articles (“Rome Pilgrimage Honors Women Officeholders in Early Church” and “Pilgrims Celebrate Women Officeholders,” 2006, and “Rome Pilgrims Explore Sites of Women Officeholders,” 2007) as well as its 2006 Itinerary and 2007 and 2008 pilgrimage brochures. Externally published sources include Sylvia Poggioli’s story “Pilgrims Trace Women's Role in Early Church,” aired on NPR: Weekend Edition Sunday; Carol Glatz’s Catholic News Service article “U.S., Canadian Catholics Tour Rome to Honor Lives of Church Women” (both 2006); and Margot Patterson’s National Catholic Reporter article “Finding ‘Herstory’: Pilgrims in Rome Examine Women’s Leadership Roles in the Early Christian Church” (2007). I also draw upon several “Celebrating Women Witnesses” educational resources (which were distributed to the pilgrims during the trip) and prayer services (which were the basis for the rituals and liturgies conducted at each site). Seeking clarification on details in the newsletter articles she wrote, I also spoke briefly with Schenk.

PERFORMING THE SEARCH FOR SUPPRESSED HISTORY

One of Catholic feminist theology’s central aims is to seek out alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and this was indeed the primary goal of the FutureChurch pilgrimage. Its “express purpose” was “honoring women leaders in the early church and tracing archaeologic evidence that, official statements to the contrary, the Catholic Church does have a tradition of ordaining women to church ministries (“Rome Pilgrimage Honors”). For Schenk, supporting

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3 No author is listed for these articles, but the third one is by Schenk; I believe the other two are as well (Schenk).
4 Poggioli joined the pilgrims for about two days on each trip.
women’s ordination was a likely outcome of the pilgrimage, but only a “very secondary” goal in designing it; her primary goal was “to find out, who were these women, what do we know about them, how can we celebrate them?” Throughout the trip, the participants gained a first-hand awareness of many women in the early church, and of the evidence suggesting that these women served important leadership roles, including as bishops and house-church leaders. These long-forgotten women were looked to as “spiritual ancestors” for contemporary Christian women; in Schenk’s words, the journey’s central focus was “about helping women retrieve their history.”

To uncover this history, the pilgrims used two different “ways of knowing” – which Diana Taylor calls “the archive and the repertoire.” The title of the pilgrimage was “A Journey of Discovery,” and both of those keywords are central to its work. This pilgrimage is focused on “discovery” – seeing the breadth of archaeological records for oneself, discovering that women were in fact an important part of church history, and understanding history and women’s roles differently because of that discovery. For Schenk and the other pilgrims, the amount of evidence of women’s leadership was “stunning,” and “to try to experience it in its own context was huge.” To that end, they sought out the archive of knowledge, but they interpreted it in new ways. Moreover, the word “journey” highlights the fact that this event was not an “educational seminar” or a “weekend retreat,” but a pilgrimage, a journey to the physical site of the first- and second-century activity of female church leaders (and to the second- through fourth-century records of their importance and activity). Throughout this physical experience, the pilgrims engaged in repertoiric, embodied performances, including liturgy and ritual, in order to expand their knowledge of these sites and histories beyond what the archive can reveal.

It is also notable that this site is none other than the catacombs of Rome itself, the birthplace of the Christian church. As such, it is an example of what Turner and Turner call
“prototypical pilgrimages”: pilgrimages, such as those to Jerusalem, Rome, and Mecca, that were established by the religion’s founder or an early disciple. Turner and Turner stress that these pilgrimages “dramatically manifest […] the orthodoxy of the faith from which they have sprung” (18). The pilgrims’ discovery of women’s church history is particularly powerful because it is situated not as a radically alternative way of looking at history but as a prototypical pilgrimage: a deeply traditional means of connecting to and understanding “the orthodoxy of the faith.” That is, although a Catholic pilgrimage to women’s hidden history may seem unorthodox, the trip’s form and destination frame it as legitimate and emphasize the “orthodoxy” of its discoveries.

For these women, a “journey of discovery” is necessary because so much of their culture’s history has been written out of the archive. As with women’s history writ large, much of women’s church history has been lost entirely or subverted and “spun” by the men who recorded, interpreted, dismissed, or erased it. As with the “Celebrating Women Witnesses” prayer services, this pilgrimage was designed to help women retrieve “the historic memory of early women leaders in the church” (Schenk). According to Schenk, “So many of the women that come down to us in history have been subverted, have been spun … but the vast majority of them were not [silent], that’s why they got named in history.” Across history, she continued, stories are “always told from the point of view of men. […] Recognizing this] opens up a whole other area of knowledge.”

Not only have men’s “biases” shaped the way that church history has been told, but they have also limited which parts of history have been told – specifically, the history of men. For example, many of the extant descriptions of women’s church leadership appear in the writings of later “church fathers,” who disapproved of this participation and criticized it as a practice to be
avoided, not a legacy to be passed on. In other cases, records of women leaders have later been dismissed, as in the case of Paul’s Romans 16:7 celebration of the female Junia, “outstanding among the apostles,” who in the late Middle Ages began to be rewritten as “Junius” by translators who decided that since women cannot be apostles, Paul’s reference could not have been to a woman. Women’s history has also been deleted from the official Roman Catholic lectionary, as when the lectionary version of Romans 16 skips over Paul’s reference to Phoebe.

Because of such silences, erasures, and omissions, women’s stories are not told and women are unable to see themselves in history; the history of “the church’s early women saints and leaders” is “‘not the kind of thing your average Catholic hears about,’” Schenk said (Glatz). For example, the celebration of Mary Magdalene is particularly important because women do not see themselves reflected in church history, especially not “in the gospel story, because” – despite the presence of several important, named women and many other unnamed women – “it seems like Jesus gallivanting around with twelve men” (Schenk). That is, erasure from the archive is understood as oppressive to women because it limits the identity performances options that are available to them as “legitimate” ones. As I will discuss in more depth later in this chapter, women’s “legitimate” identity performances within the Church are often limited by a conservative understanding of Bible-based gender roles and restricted by the few “models” of biblical womanhood who are frequently remembered. (For example, the Virgin Mother, the so-called “reformed prostitute” Mary Magdalene, the adoring devotee Mary, and her busy-in-the-kitchen sister Martha are the only “models” who come readily to my mind, even after having spent most Sunday mornings of my life engaged in church activity.) For this reason, as Schenk suggested, “many women are ‘really hungry’ to see women represented in church history and to discover the history of women leaders in the early church”; because of this, she and
FutureChurch designed this trip as “a spiritual pilgrimage that would help women learn about and reflect on the lives of some of the church's most outstanding female figure” (Glatz). That is, since typical worship and Bible study seem to prove insufficient means by which women can find helpful models for their gendered spiritual living, these pilgrims turn to alternative forms of study and worship in order to expand the “legitimate” performance options available to them.

Interested in uncovering the suppressed history of women’s leadership in the early Christian church, Schenk and her companions engaged in the physical practice of pilgrimage in order to go to the historical evidence and experience it for themselves. They also sought out “alternative wisdom,” often in the form of Irvin’s, Tulloch’s, and other archaeologists’ and historians’ interpretations of what that evidence represents. These two main activities reflect the two ways in which these pilgrims sought out their lost history: re-reading the archive of historical evidence, and engaging in rituals, liturgies, and other performances of the repertoire.

**Re-reading the Archive**

Throughout the pilgrimage, the group examined archaeological evidence, but was willing (and eager) to re-interpret frescoes and sarcophagi – that is, to “re-read” the archive. According to Taylor, “‘Archival’ memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all of those items *supposedly* resistant to change” (19, italics added). Journeying to and re-interpreting that archive is what I have called a “performance of challenge,” because it suggests that archival materials are not “resistant to change” after all, but that they are made meaningful through interpretation. Taylor notes that one “myth” about the archive “is that it is unmediated, that objects located there might mean something outside the framing of the archival impetus itself. What makes an object archival is the process whereby it is
selected, classified, and presented for analysis. Another myth is that the archive resists change, corruptibility, and political manipulation” (19). The archive, Taylor says, “sustains power” (19). Therefore, a “journey of discovery” like this one is a “performance of challenge” to the power that is sustained by the “unmediated,” uncorruptable archive – in this case, the Church hierarchy.

The performance of re-reading the archive (and challenging its power) began with the leaders who created preparatory reading materials, lectures, and slide presentations for the pilgrims, and then led on-site exploration and interpretive study. The educational directors suggested that interpretation is not only possible but necessary; as Schenk put it, without such guides, “sometimes when you go to the catacomb site, you see this small image at the end of a dark dark tunnel, and you have no idea what it means, what it would have meant to first, second, third century [Rome].” Through their lectures and commentary, Irvin and Tulloch illuminated the evidence, helping the pilgrims not just to understand the “orthodox” interpretation but also encouraging them to re-read and re-interpret the archive.

Although these leaders recognized the value of the archive in constructing an understanding of the past, they appealed not to established orthodoxy but to alternative theology as an interpretive lens. That is, whereas “orthodox” historians’ interpretations are shaped by their belief that the church has never ordained women, these leaders’ interpretive possibilities (and the archival record they chose to examine) were expanded and shaped by feminist historiographers’ belief that women were active leaders in the early church and by feminist theologians’ framing of that early church as radically egalitarian. These interpretations, which may run counter to the “official” narrative, allow the pilgrims to recognize the frescos, mosaics, and other artifacts they encounter as evidence of women’s leadership in the early church and as representations of the “spiritual ancestors” of women leaders in the church of today.
Throughout Rome, the pilgrims uncovered a fascinating, complex record of women’s participation and leadership in the first few centuries of Christianity. Interestingly, although archival sources are useful here, the most “authoritative” of archival sources – texts – are of limited value. In her book *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, Nicola Denzey notes that “historians traditionally turn first to textual sources. This inclination reflects our training as historians and our own comfort with reconstructing history from text” (xix). However, because there are very few written sources that reflect the lives of women during this time period (and all of those are limited to the upper classes), Denzey suggests that “If we look for evidence for women’s activities as influential patrons of the early Roman church, no source preserves this better than visual and archaeological sources” (xv–xvi). Such visual evidence, in the form of “art, inscriptions, and literature, belongs to the hidden history of women’s leadership, a history that has been suppressed by the selective memory of succeeding generations of male historians” (Torjesen 10). Among this “hidden history” are several frescoes and mosaics, including a fresco of a woman “being clothed in priestly vestments” and “mosaics of early women leaders” (“Rome Pilgrimage Honors”), as well as a third-century fresco representing “A veiled woman [who] prays with her hands upraised” (Torjesen 52). Even more than textual history, these images’ images and meanings are open for discussion and debate.

In particular, the pilgrims also viewed the “mosaic of Theodora Episcopa,” which is found in the basilica dedicated to Saints Prudentiana and Praxedis. This artwork portrays four female figures, lined up side-by-side. The first three – Jesus’ mother Mary and the two saints – are easily recognizable to historians. The fourth figure’s head is framed in a square halo, an artistic technique in catacomb art indicating that the person was living when the image was

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5 The 2008 “Journey of Discovery” brochure includes small photographs of this mosaic and the Catacombs of Priscilla’s eucharistic-banquet mosaic. A larger image of the Theodora Episcopa mosaic can be seen at the Roman Catholic WomenPriests’ home page, <http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/>.
made. In her book *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, Karen Jo Torjesen describes how the “carefully lettered inscription identifies the face […] as Theodora Episcopa, which means Bishop Theodora. The masculine form for bishop in Latin is *episcopus*; the feminine form is *episcopa*. The mosaic’s visual evidence and the inscription’s grammatical evidence point out unmistakably that Bishop Theodora was a woman” (10). However, even this bit of archival history, which combines textual and visual evidence, is strongly contested. Torjesen continues: “But the *a* on Theodora has been partially effaced by scratches across the glass tiles of the mosaic, leading to the disturbing conclusion that attempts were made to deface the feminine ending, perhaps even in antiquity” (10). While women’s church history does exist in the archive, it is frequently erased, scratched out, or painted over – all too often literally – and so the physical performance of pilgrimage allows women to uncover their history and interpret it for themselves. For them, inscriptions such as this one “provide compelling evidence that women held leadership and ministerial roles in the early church identical to those held by men, as apostles, prophets, teachers of theology, priests, deacons and bishops” (Poggioli). This is the interpretation supported by the FutureChurch leaders: that these images represent respected women who held church leadership positions. It is also the interpretation reached by the pilgrims, who, “to a person,” Schenk described, “all said, ‘this was so much more than I ever imagined.’ […] Most people were overwhelmed by the amount of data supporting our contention that there were prominent women leaders in the early church.”

Journeying to and seeking out these fragments of “hidden history,” and interpreting them as evidence of women’s leadership, are *performances of challenge* to oppressive traditions and orthodoxies. As James T. Morgan puts it, “[g]oing on pilgrimage or becoming a pilgrim might
be termed a piece of active or passive resistance by individuals or groups of individuals within an established faith” (566). Frustrated with those “orthodox” interpretations and traditions that limit women’s “legitimate” performance possibilities within the church, Schenk and the other pilgrimage leaders embraced the fact that their reading of the uncovered historical evidence challenges the Vatican’s claim to hold sole interpretive authority. The existence of other, alternative interpretations reveals that the archive is not unchanging, nor is its meaning “natural” or uninterpreted. Instead, these performances of challenge suggest, “What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied. Bones might remain the same, even though their story may change, depending on the paleontologist or forensic anthropologist who examines them” (Taylor 19). Re-reading the archive reveals that the archive is in fact interpreted, valued, and given meaning in ways that “may change” – and that is not value-neutral, in that interpreting the archive constitutes theology.

For example, in response to Papal pronouncements that the Church cannot ordain women because it never has done so, the pilgrimage leaders appeal to the authority of the historical archive to situate their position within the religious tradition, but re-interpret that evidence in ways that suggest that other interpretations are also legitimate possibilities. Specifically, they suggest that pilgrimaging to alternative archival fragments and re-reading that evidence as evidence of women’s leadership roles in the early church may be a way of countering the Roman Catholic ruling against women’s ordination. As Schenk described, the pilgrimage reveals that “‘Right there from the beginning, the early church was gender-balanced’” (Patterson 10). The “suppressed history” she and her fellow pilgrims discovered is a direct challenge to the Vatican’s official statements that the Catholic Church has no tradition of ordaining women to ministry.
“Church officials can tell us that they have no authority to ordain women but it is incorrect to say, as they have since 1976, that there is no tradition of women's ordination in the Catholic Church […]. The archaeological, epigraphical and literary data plainly show that we have had many women officeholders, including priests, deacons and bishops, as those roles were understood at the time. We are grateful for the opportunity to honor these wonderful women and learn about their leadership.” (Schenk, qtd. in “Rome Pilgrimage Honors”)

For these pilgrims, a pilgrimage to the hidden history of Rome is not only a chance to uncover and learn about these women leaders, but is itself a performance of challenge, questioning (male) Church authorities’ claim to be sole arbiters of archival evidence and claiming the right to interpret this evidence for themselves and to gain the “alternative wisdom” it offers.

This interpretation of women’s church history is supported by extensive archaeological and historical evidence. However, it is not only different from received church history, but is also ambiguous – an ambiguity that can be frustrating for historical research but which is central to feminist theology. For example, Denzey states that, when looking at “evidence” such as the Catacombs of Priscilla’s fresco, “we are initially so sure of what we thing we see. In truth, the image itself presents a dizzying range of interpretive possibilities” (93). Or, as Tulloch put it, “‘When you get to the bottom of the well, it’s muddy’” (Patterson 10). She and Schenk often interpreted frescos and images in ways that differed not only from the tour guide’s description, but even from each other’s; in this way, the pilgrims “were exposed to the ambiguities of

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6 Torjesen summarizes: “more and more historians are now demonstrating, with increasing persuasiveness, that women provided religious leadership in Jewish and Christian communities over long stretches of their histories. […] Giorgio Otranto, an Italian professor of church history, has shown through papal letters and inscriptions that women participated in the Catholic priesthood for the first thousand years of the church’s history. The last thirty years of American scholarship have produced an amazing range of evidence for women’s roles as deacons, priests, presbyters, and even bishops in Christian churches from the first through the thirteenth century” (2).
history” (Patterson 10). But while the pilgrims see ambiguous trace references to women’s leadership as evidence of a deeper history in need of continued interpretation and as reminders of the many other women who remain forgotten, more conservative scholars avoid ambiguity, and choose the most orthodox interpretation as the only possible (i.e., “legitimate”) one.

For example, all that is known for certain about “Episcopa Theodora” is that she was the mother of Pope Pascal I. As Irvin told the pilgrims as they stood around the mosaic, her title is not always interpreted as “Bishop”: “‘Some people say, well, that's what they call popes’ mothers. They give them honorary titles as bishop. Do you know of any parallels to that?’” (qtd. in Poggioli). For Irvin, apparently, it was this “honorary title” theory and not the mosaic’s inscription that seemed – although “orthodox” – unsupported by the evidence and unlikely.

Nonetheless, many conservative scholars insist that titles such as this one, and variants on “priest” or “deacon” used to describe women, must have been simply honorary, or “a way of showing the high esteem, respect and earthly power the person possessed,” and do “not prove women were granted that ‘juridical or institutional role’ within the church,” as Dominican Father Gianluigi Boschi put it (Glatz). “‘If it were true there were female bishops’ exercising authority in the early church, ‘then why aren't they talked about in early writings?’” (Glatz). For such scholars, evidence that does not match the Church’s official history is dismissed as fragmentary and inconclusive. The Church’s interpretation, supported by (or created to support) its theology, is the orthodox meaning; any counter-reading or “alternative wisdom” would, Boschi said, “have to be proved.” His “rebuttal” highlights the archive’s dependence upon certainty; orthodoxy and doctrine are efficient tools for maintaining the status quo because they insist upon only one interpretation, thus making it difficult to see that this “natural” version of history is indeed shaped by interpretation and selection. In this way, the archive “sustains power” (Taylor 19).
FutureChurch pilgrims understand that dismissals such as Boschi’s do not mean that the recovered women and their leadership were illegitimate, but that their alternative performances of “women being church” are powerful performances of challenge to the patriarchal status quo. Suggesting that there is any other, also-legitimate interpretation of history or performance of identity threatened (and continue to threaten) Church authorities’ power because it upsets their ability to control the archive and its meaning. In the same way that women priests were suppressed at the Council of Laodicea, “not because they were not orthodox, but because of the belief that women were subordinate to men,” women’s history of leadership is silenced not because such leadership is truly unorthodox, but because it runs counter to official Catholic ideas about gender roles and male leadership (Poggioli). Standing in the catacombs, amid evidence of women’s leadership, the pilgrims asked each other: “why is all this evidence denied?” One replied, “It's a power thing. I mean, there'd be so much power to lose.” Another agreed: “Everything would be just totally upside down. There'd have to massive change.” Recognizing that the evidence surrounding them threatened to upset the Church’s hierarchies and its stranglehold on interpretive authority, the women were excited about the possibilities for transformation such “massive change” would effect: “it could be very enriching,” “very creative”; “We all long for it” (Poggioli). These pilgrims understood that their performances to and interpretations of these mosaics and frescoes was an embodied threat to those in power and to patriarchal hierarchies that were dependent upon the established orthodoxy.

Boschi’s logic also accords all authority to the archive and leaves no room for feminist attempts to uncover the lost histories contained in the its silences. Boschi concluded his response to Theodora Episcopa’s “suppressed history” by declaring, “It is unclear what role women played when […] worship took place in people's homes” (Glatz). This dismissal of that which is
“unclear” ended the conversation in his mind, but for the FutureChurch pilgrims, it suggests an exciting lacuna, an ambiguous moment in history that is suggestive of forgotten women and their stories and offers an opportunity to uncover possibilities of those women’s roles in history.

Unlike archive and orthodoxy, which gain their power from appearing to be fixed, uncontested, and “resistant to change,” performance is able to cope with the presence of “alternative possibilities.” In fact, whereas ambiguity challenges the clear-cut nature of orthodoxy and must be resolved for the orthodoxy to stand, ritual actually works through ambiguity. Working in a mode of “ritual paradox,” ritual effects transformation because it embodies two possibilities simultaneously – what is and what is not yet but will be, for example, or what is now and what has been in the past. If it could not negotiate this ambiguity through embodied performance, ritual could not effect change between states or bring the new state (the “what will be”) into existence. For this reason, ritual and other performances are particularly effective ways of illuminating and negotiating the ambiguity that orthodoxy seeks to erase, and so of being “performances of challenge” to the archive and its power.

**Repertoiric Performances**

The second way in which these pilgrims seek out their “suppressed history” is through performance, including the “repertoire.” According to Taylor, the repertoire is that which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all of those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). The pilgrims’ rituals and liturgies are repertoiric performances, “ways of knowing” in and through the body. The pilgrimage itself is also an act of the repertoire. As Taylor describes it, “Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency,
referring also to ‘the finder, discoverer,’ and the meaning ‘to find out.’ The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). Pilgrims set off on their journeys because they recognize that the knowledge they seek requires “being there,” not learning through books and photographs but participating in the production and transmission of knowledge by seeing, touching, or worshiping at the sacred site itself. They may also recognize that performing at a sacred site may help them to negotiate the site’s historical ambiguity or multiple interpretations in ways that textual descriptions, seeking to appear authoritative, do not.

In The Bone Gatherers, Denzey describes her work in piecing together and retelling the stories of women in the early church – stories that are hinted at, but mostly lost from, the archive. In that she studied bones, paintings, and catacombs, Denzey’s work is certainly concerned with the archive. Tellingly, however, she describes her work in terms of performance:

This book tells the story – or really, the stories – of these lost and forgotten women. […] There are no fictions in this book, but the reader will come across something akin to feminist midrash – that is to say, like some Jewish feminist theologians, I want to sing stories of these lost women’s lives.⁷ I want to write these women back to life. This process involves not just listening and looking intently, but engaging the imagination, reconstructing, drawing connections, making assumptions, looking again, walking and rewalking through a space, actively wondering and pondering, holding these women’s bones in my hands, and sitting in front of their images for many, many hours. (xvi)

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⁷ “Midrash” refers to the Jewish practice of expounding upon the Torah’s sacred stories and laws, “filling in the gaps” and providing new interpretations. Although it has long been an act of oral or written commentary, contemporary midrash now often includes performance (including creating poems, music, drama, or visual art) to “bring to life” those stories that are barely visible through the sacred text’s “gaps.”
As Denzey reveals, when women’s histories have been lost from the archive, they cannot be recovered by simply “looking,” no matter how intently, at that archive. Instead, they must be re-membered through imaginative reconstruction, re-embodied by walking through their spaces, and even, through bones and images, allowed to speak.

This is no longer an appeal to the archive, that collection of knowledge that, “supposedly resistant to change,” can be accessed by anyone at anytime to reveal the same knowledge (Taylor 19). Instead, it is a “production and reproduction of knowledge” – knowledge that does change – in which Denzey participates “by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (Taylor 20). Because only echoes and fragments of “these lost women’s lives” remain in the archive, Denzey cannot simply write their stories; she must re-write them through performance, singing them “back to life.” As the FutureChurch pilgrims discovered when they encountered similarly ambiguous fragments, writing, ritualizing, and re-membering spiritual ancestors “back to life” requires more than an appeal to the “unchanging” archive and its powerful orthodoxy. Instead, because those women and their stories are almost completely lost, they can only be recovered through embodiment and imagination. In this way, pilgrimage itself can be “something akin to feminist midrash,” “not just listening and looking intently,” but actively re-membering erased women – lending them new bodies through which to sing their old songs – through performance.

The pilgrims also learned about and connected with their “spiritual ancestors” in performative ways, including liturgies and rituals. These repertoiric performances were closely tied to the archival and textual study they did, as led by educational directors Irvin and Tulloch, but embraced another “way of knowing.” Through these rituals, they “sang the stories” of the forgotten women leaders of the early church, not simply learning about the orthodox version of
history but *producing* and *reproducing* new knowledge “by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (Taylor 20). Because ritual allows for mystery and paradox, their rituals of remembering allowed them to produce this knowledge *with* and not just *about* their spiritual ancestors, thus legitimizing their own, alternative identity performances.

FutureChurch’s “Celebrating Women Witnesses” collection was used as a foundation for much of this interpretive study and performance. Schenk described how, “for every place that we went, […] we had provided the educational essay beforehand so people had a chance to sort of get into it […] and then we did the prayer piece that went with” each site. These educational resources study biblical women such as Prisca and Phoebe, and saints including Monica, Catherine of Siena, Perpetua, and Clare. Each one is comprised of a three-page essay introducing the woman’s historical background, scholarly interpretations of her importance, hypotheses suggesting possible understandings of unclear evidence, and suggested readings. Each also includes a two-page prayer service created “to honor” the woman leader, including suggested biblical readings, songs and responses, prayers, and opportunity for reflection. Several of these prayer services and rituals were performed in honor of the woman at whose tomb or catacomb the group stood.

For example, in the Church of St. Praxedis, the site of the Theodora Episcopa mosaic and of a mosaic of Praxedis and Pudentiana with Peter and Paul, the women performed a liturgy and ritual in memory of Phoebe (Itinerary). The Celebrating Women Witnesses study on Phoebe, which the pilgrims were given beforehand, reveals that when Paul describes Phoebe as “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae,” he uses the same (masculine) Greek word *diakonos* that he used to describe himself, indicating “that Phoebe could, like Paul, Timothy, and Apollos, have been a preacher and a teacher” (Noonan 2). The study also describes the other ways in which Phoebe is
likely to have performed her own identity as a woman Christ-follower in the first century, including by aiding Paul as a patron, benefactor, and missionary, and by hosting “the eucharistic liturgies in her home” (2). Highlighting Phoebe’s relationship with Paul legitimizes her as a valid model for Christian women’s own, equally varied, identity performances in the church.

After establishing Phoebe’s leadership in the church and her important role in carrying Paul’s letter to the Romans, the study switches into a performance mode, preparing the reader for the liturgy that follows. “As the Romans to whom she carried Paul’s epistle welcomed her into their house, we welcome her into our hearts,” it says (2–3). It continues, “We pray with her for a church marked by unity and charity” (3, italics added). This statement suggests to the readers that, by re-membering Phoebe through ritual and prayer, they are performing with Phoebe. This ritual is an effective means of transformation because it brings the past into the present, paradoxically allowing this extended community of Christian women, although separated by two millennia, to worship – and so, to constitute knowledge and theology – together.

The study then extends the pilgrims’ performing-with-Phoebe beyond prayer and into the realm of identity performance. Referring to the Romans 12:6–8 instruction, “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry in ministering,” and so on, the study exhorts the reader: “We respond to our call as she did to hers” (3). This is no longer a textual study about Phoebe, but an encouragement for the readers (i.e., the pilgrims) to perform their spiritual, gendered identities with Phoebe, emulating her courage by embracing the leadership roles, however unorthodox, to which they feel themselves called. The study continues:

The breadth of [Phoebe’s] work provides inspiration for present-day imaginings about women of the Church. If she was able to be coworker, deacon, and patron
in a cultural context far more entrenched in a patriarchal worldview than our own, what possibilities does her example open up for the Church today? How are women today responding with their unique gifts to the need of the Church? (3) Phoebe’s “example” is seen as not an inspiration for women to continue in the limited gender-role performances that the Church has established as orthodoxy. Instead, praying with Phoebe may inspire new possibilities for women to perform roles that align with “their unique gifts.”

Emphasizing that these “possibilities” for performance are not only available but are needed for the continual renewal and transformation of the Church, the study again presents Phoebe as a “model” for contemporary women. It states that her leadership in the midst of a community struggling with division and liturgical turmoil makes her an especially significant model in our day. Into the midst of the Romans’ infighting and disputes over dietary laws, Phoebe brought the message of Christ’s liberating self-sacrifice. Her own presence and her delivery of Paul’s astounding epistle urged the community toward unity, patience, mutual respect and trust in the loving providence of God. (3)

This short statement legitimizes Phoebe as a model of truly “orthodox” identity performance in several ways. It reveals that her situation was similar to contemporary women’s lives; it appeals to Christ’s mission as “liberating,” thus positioning Phoebe with liberation theology and Christian feminism’s “radical equality”; it connects her directly to Paul, whose own legitimacy recommends her; and it suggests that by performing her alternative identity and her unorthodox role, she effected God-honoring transformation in the church. This study clearly establishes Phoebe as a “spiritual ancestor” to the pilgrims, one who constituted her identity through
performed acts of leadership and whose identity both was “truly orthodox” and able to legitimize contemporary women’s similar identity performances.

The “Prayer Service to Honor St. Phoebe of Cenchreae: Sister, Deacon, Benefactor,” connected to this study, also calls the participants to emulate Phoebe (4). It includes this prayer:

O God, St. Phoebe was called sister by your servant, Paul. Give us the grace to live together as sisters and brothers, daughters and sons of You, our Creator. We pray…

O God, St. Phoebe was called deacon. Grant us the courage and humility we need to embrace our own vocations and to recognize the gifts given by the Spirit to each member of our community. We pray…

O God, St. Phoebe was called benefactor. Make us a generous people who care for the needy and the stranger. We pray… (5)

As they celebrate this ritual, the pilgrims constitute their own identity performances in ways that echo Phoebe’s. The performance is transformative because, through it, the pilgrims re-member Phoebe, performing with her and as her. “By ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” that includes Phoebe, the pilgrims produce and reproduce theology and identity performances (Taylor 20). As they constitute their own identities in line with Phoebe’s and their spiritual ancestor’s identity performance becomes their own through ritual, they become – even if only in the ritual moment – Phoebe-like leaders, equally able to effect transformation in the church.

In the Basilica of St. Praxedis, the pilgrims engaged in a performance of challenge, re-interpreting the archival materials and suggesting alternative interpretations. They then performed this re-membering liturgy, ritually embodying and connecting with Phoebe and constituting their identity performances in line with her performance as a leader and diakonos in
the church. Then, as Sylvia Poggioli describes, “The visit to St. Praxedis ended with prayer and song.” She records the women’s call-and-response prayer, as they gather and to give praise and thanks for the women who have gone before us.

St. Praxedis.

[The women respond in unison:] Pray for us.

St. Pudentiana.

Pray for us.

Bishop Theodora.

Pray for us.

Before leaving this sacred space, the pilgrims recognize that the women pictured in the nearby mosaics – Praxedis, Pudentiana, and Bishop Theodora – and the other women re-membered on this pilgrimage are their “spiritual ancestors,” “women who have gone before” them. For Schenk and the pilgrims who traveled with her, what is significant about this historical evidence is not simply that it reveals women in church history, but that it reflects the presence of women who were leaders in the early church – “spiritual ancestors” of women leaders in the church of today.

Through their “journey of discovery,” these pilgrims discovered a history of women’s leadership and an awareness of the ways in which this history has been suppressed. In seeing the evidence themselves and in questioning the Vatican’s official, dismissive interpretation of it, they performed their challenge to an oppressive tradition’s claim to sole interpretation and embodied their own claim to the right to seek out alternative wisdom. They also discovered their spiritual ancestors and claimed authority in their name and in their memory. That is, performing a belief about the orthodoxy of women’s leadership in church history granted them the authority to claim this orthodoxy for themselves. Because these ancient women, such as Phoebe,
performed their identity in the church in ways that were recognized in their own day as legitimate (although perhaps alternative), re-membering these women through ritual allows the contemporary pilgrims to perform and constitute their own, alternative identity performances as equally legitimate versions of what it means to be women in the church today. That is, uncovering this silenced history and embodying it through performance lends a sense of legitimacy and historical precedent to the pilgrims’ own roles as women leaders in the church.

The pilgrims also discovered the long-lost importance of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to women’s leadership. In many early images, including the mosaic of Theodora Episcopa, Mary is “often portrayed as ratifying the ministry of early women leaders” (“Rome Pilgrims Explore”). A fresco in the Catacomb of Priscilla also shows “a woman deacon standing in the ‘orans’ position of prayer next to a woman, wearing a bishop's robe, who is apparently the Virgin Mary – suggesting women leaders saw their ‘apostolic succession’ came from Mary,” Irvin said” (Glatz). Claims of apostolic succession are crucial to many of the arguments against women’s ordination, so the suggestion that women too may stand in such a line is a powerful one.

A pilgrimage that seeks out images of women in priestly garments, sharing the Eucharist, or preaching from the scriptures contains the potential for transformation because this hidden history gives the pilgrims new models, new performance options though which they can constitute their identities as spiritual and as women. Through ritual and performance, the pilgrims claim early leaders such as Phoebe, Theodora Episcopa, Praxedis and Pudentiana, and even Mary as their spiritual ancestors, women who provide new models for identity performances and legitimize these alternative roles as orthodox. In these ways, the pilgrims discover that they, as Schenk put it, “stand on the shoulders of other women in our tradition, right back to Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus.” Re-interpreting the archive in
challenge to an oppressive orthodoxy, singing lost women’s stories “back to life” through
liturgy, and re-membering those women leaders through ritual are repertoiric performance
practices that encourage the pilgrims to see these alternative roles as legitimate ones, long-lost
but nonetheless orthodox, for contemporary women.

CONSTITUTING NEW INTERPRETATIONS THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Through their “journey of discovery” to the roots of the church, the FutureChurch
pilgrims sought out an alternative history, one in conflict with church orthodoxy but supported
by reinterpretations of archival evidence. Through their acts of re-seeing that archive as
ambiguous and uncovering the possibilities its silences contained, they performed a challenge to
the Vatican authority that is empowered by the seemingly changeless, unmediated nature of that
archive. Then, by remembering and embodying ancient leaders such as Phoebe, the pilgrims
also gained “spiritual ancestors” whose performances of women’s leadership legitimized the
pilgrims own identity performances and expanded the “legitimate” performances available to
them. Grounded in their alternative or neo-orthodox understanding of history and empowered by
their ritualized connection with their “spiritual ancestors,” the pilgrims were then able to
reinterpret one of the Church’s oldest and most sacred traditions, through a repertoiric
performance of a eucharistic bread-breaking ritual. Although this performance challenges the
official, orthodox meanings of bread-breaking and priesthood, it is understood by the pilgrims as
equally legitimate because it reflect the lives of long-forgotten but nonetheless orthodox women
leaders and is in conversation with the experiences of women in the church today. Thus, through
pilgrimage and ritual, these women are performing their connection to their “spiritual ancestors,”
the women leaders of the early church who have been erased from the archive. Working in
ritual’s mode of paradox, they are also performing as and with those ancestors; in doing so, their performance of this bread-breaking ritual constitutes theology and identity differently.

One of the most remarkable moments of “risking new interpretations” through performance took place in the Catacombs of Priscilla. Here, a second-century fresco shows seven people dining, a chalice and seven baskets before them. The guidebook sold at the catacombs says of the fresco: “The scene represents the Eucharistic banquet, as we can clearly see.”

The text doesn’t mention it, but the figures in the fresco appear to be women. If the scene shows the Eucharistic banquet, were women presiding at Eucharist in the second century?

Feminist scholars increasingly seem to think so. (Patterson 10)

This fresco was discovered in 1894 by Josef Wilpert, who saw in it “‘six men and one woman,’ celebrating the Eucharist,” and dubbed it the Fractio Panis, the “breaking of bread” (Denzey 93). The image is very faded and partially erased, and very ambiguous, so that interpretations of it reveal as much about the interpreter as about the image. Nonetheless, Wilpert’s traditional description remains the “orthodox” interpretation (or, as that orthodoxy would like us to believe, the natural, unmediated description) of the image. However, as Patterson notes, several recent scholars see it differently. Torjesen is likely one of the feminist scholars Patterson is citing; she describes the fresco in this way: “A woman breaks bread at an early Christian eucharist. The clothing and hairstyles worn by the participants suggest that most of them are women” (Torjesen 52). Denzey is another such scholar; she sees it as an image of seven women (98).

At this sacred site, encouraged by and echoing the site of the frescoed, bread-breaking women before them, the pilgrims prayed and broke bread with each other. FutureChurch
describes this ritual as an “especially moving bread breaking agape honoring St. Prisca” ("Rome Pilgrims"); Patterson wrote that the women shared “an informal liturgy of song and prayer complete with a quasi-eucharistic meal, breaking off morsels of bread from rolls taken from breakfast and serving the bread to each other with a murmured invocation” (12). Breaking bread or sharing a meal in the style of the Eucharist, but without the presence or blessing of a priest, is a highly unorthodox practice (although, as we will see below, it is not uncommon among women’s spiritual communities, house churches, and ritual groups). In fact, as the Church-wide priest shortage has shifted priestly and pastoral roles to allow women pastors to lead priestless parishes, leading the Eucharist is the one duty that is still fully restricted to male priests.

As it is included in the “Celebrating Women Witnesses” series of prayer services that the pilgrims used, the ritual to remember “Prisca: Co-Worker in the Gospel” opens with Romans 16:3. Paul writes, “My greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my coworkers in Christ Jesus, who risked death to save my life. I am not the only one to owe them a debt of gratitude, all the churches among the Gentiles do as well. My greetings also to the church that meets at their house” (4). Along with the five other biblical references to Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila, this brief trace of Prisca’s life suggests that she was highly respected by Paul as a prominent leader in the first-century church, even more important than her husband (because she is named first) (1).

Having established Prisca’s orthodoxy as a legitimate, influential leader in the early church, the “Gathering Prayer” then encourages participants to emulate her example; it suggests that “we gather to remember the life of Prisca who with her husband Aquila helped spread the good news of the Gospel throughout the ancient world. We ask now for the gift of openness to that same Gospel as we strive to live its meaning ever more deeply in our lives” (4). In this
moment, the pilgrims begin to explicitly constitute their own identities in line with Prisca’s, producing and reproducing knowledge about “that same Gospel” with her.

Following a time of prayer, the celebrants sing together a Eucharistic hymn: “Do this and remember Love […] When we do this, we remember those we love” (4). (The phrase “when we do this, we remember” explicitly echoes Christ’s description of the ritual: “When you do this, you remember me.”) The presider then declares, “We take, bless, break this bread and share it with each other as a sign and symbol of our desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus: doing justice, loving others, proclaiming the presence of the living God around us and within us” (5). By blessing and sharing the bread – actions normally reserved for a (male) priest – these women are embodying “priestliness,” which I am defining as representing Christ or being imago Dei and as being bread-breakers. This ritual act is significant in that, by breaking bread, the women are constituted as bread-breakers, as priestly, and as images of Christ. As Bell notes,

the molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely communicate subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself. (100)

In the same way, the act of breaking bread “restructures” the pilgrims’ bodies, producing (or constituting) one who is priestly “through the act itself.”

Citing the Eucharist

This repertoric performance works toward transformation in three significant ways: by performing it, the pilgrims cite Eucharistic practices, re-embody Prisca, and connect with a
community of spiritual ancestors. First, the performance cites both the official Catholic Eucharist and other eucharistic rituals; in performing it, the pilgrims reclaim the authority to ritualize and to constitute theology. The eucharistic ritual performed in memory of Prisca thus embodies alternative interpretations of the meaning of bread-breaking itself. This ritual was, according to Schenk, “not ever meant to be a replacement of a Sunday Eucharist; those services have a whole other purpose.” Instead, it was framed as a “small e eucharist.” As Schenk described, “what that means is … in the Catholic tradition, only ordained priests celebrate Mass or the Eucharist. We had no ordained priests here, but Jesus did tell us to break bread with each other, so [we decided that] ‘that’s what we’ll do here.’” As a “small e eucharist,” it is legible to all (participants and observers) as a Eucharistic banquet because it cites that form – hymn, prayer, blessing, bread-sharing, and benediction. As a ritual, it is meaningful because it follows an established form, and its symbols can be understood within that context.

However, the ritual also cites another spiritual tradition: feminist ritualizers’ practice of performing bread-breaking rituals. The suggestion that women can legitimately break bread and perform “small e eucharists” is not unique to FutureChurch, but is a thread running throughout women-church groups and similar communities. As Ruether contends, “Women-Church represents a radical dissolution of this whole theory and practice of clerical hierarchical control over sacraments, teaching and administration. This is seen most centrally in the appropriation of the power to do Eucharist by the people” (“Women-Church Movement” 202). In these contexts, a bread-breaking ritual echoes an official Eucharist but, as ritualizers choose new symbols, create alternative liturgies, and replace hierarchy with community, it can take on many new meanings. Thus, this ritual must be read within the context of similar bread-breaking rituals and of Catholic women’s groups who do share Eucharist together, as “[w]omen in small but growing numbers
are gathering in informal groups, often in private homes, to celebrate Eucharist without inviting or including a priest to act as presider or celebrant” (Dierks 15).

In these contexts, bread-breaking takes on new layers of meaning, as “[c]hallenging traditional rules of performance opens the possibility of devising and interpreting rituals no longer controlled by the hierarchical and marginalizing power structures of the past” (Northup 100). For example, it may become a celebration of the goodness of God’s immanence and of embodiment, as when it is read as “a celebration of the goodness of embodiment, a celebration of divine embodiment through the incarnation and of the embodiment of the church in the bodies and lives of women and men who are church” (Watson 90). Using symbols drawn from women’s everyday lives is another way to shape this ritual as a celebration of the sacredness of embodiment. Similarly, when “The bread and wine of the Eucharist are understood […] as simply the ordinary food and drink of daily meals of the Mediterranean world,” they may highlight the transformational power of spiritual celebration: “Translated into religious symbols, they represent our ordinary life transformed and restored to its potential for goodness” (Ruether, “Women-Church” 202).

Because of their power to work on multiple symbolic levels and because of women’s desire to reclaim liturgy, ritual authority, and the ability to define their spiritual experiences for themselves, eucharistic rituals are frequently used in feminist ritualizing groups. Two examples will be useful here. In 1993, some two thousand people – mostly women – gathered in Minneapolis for the Re-Imagining Conference. Theologians, clergy, and lay people from across a wide range of denominations gathered to discuss and experiment with liturgical forms, symbols, and metaphors that reflected their own experiences of God. One of the conference’s central themes was naming, offering many new names for God, including Sophia (a feminine
word, meaning “wisdom,” used to describe God in the Jewish scriptures). This conference featured a bread-breaking communion ritual, which used “traditional breads from different parts of the world” and replaced wine with milk and honey so as to “disrupt and deconstruct traditional eucharistic expectations while nonetheless providing an equivalent sacramentalism” (Northup 45, 100). Although the conference quickly became controversial and sponsoring denominations sought to distance themselves from its use of a non-orthodox bread-breaking and its feminine names for God, many of the participants perceived the rituals as effective and powerful.

Another example of women’s eucharistic fellowship took place in Oakland in 1997, when a group of feminist Christian leaders held an event called “Critical Mass: Women Celebrating Eucharist.” The ritual involved dancing, music, and silence as well as bread-breaking. In the opening statements, the organizers declared that “‘The Eucharist we will create together today […] is the Mass as we know it with a Mass that we can only begin to imagine’” (Redmont). Such a description links the two symbolic layers – one orthodox, one in process – and invites them to work together in ambiguous ways. The speaker then claims “the freedom in our church to try on, to experiment and to do so publicly.” Redmont describes the bread-breaking:

We hold the loaves of bread and the cups of red wine close to our hearts: This is my body, this is my blood. […] After placing the gifts back on the table, we touch each other’s arms. We repeat: This is my body; this is my blood; and move into the congregation to share and spread this gesture […]. You are my flesh and blood, we are saying, and Christ’s flesh and blood. We know this in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup; we know this in touching each other’s bodies. This ritual raises questions about “the body of Christ,” the purpose of the Eucharist, and the meaning of priestliness, but it invites the participants to answer them for themselves.
Thus, this performance also cites *those* rituals, drawing in a second layer of symbology, including the goodness of women’s embodiment, the “sacred” realm of everyday life, God’s immanence, and women’s priestliness. Although this ritual explicitly echoes the Catholic Eucharist and claims those symbols, its significance is that it *reclaims* the Eucharist’s bread-breaking practices and returns them to the hands of women and their worship in everyday life. Citing this form but performing it differently allows the pilgrims to re-interpret what “bread-breaking” is, what it means, what else it means, and how it can be used to transform the church.

Formal Catholic theology has little room for understanding a performance as both a sacrament and *not* a sacrament; a ritual is either the Eucharist, or it is not Eucharist at all. However, the embodied performance of such a ritual – in that rituals are *always* both citational and new – is able to negotiate this ambiguity. Refusing to nail down the ritual’s “true” meaning or its Eucharistic value, Schenk told me that Jesus’ instruction was to break bread with each other, so “that’s what we did, and we let others draw their own conclusions about it!” She insisted that the ritualizers “weren’t making any claims about transubstantiation,” but she did leave the Eucharist interpretation open for each participant to make for herself: “Whether people think of it as the Catholic Eucharist, that’s very debatable.”

The ritual’s meaning was “debatable” because it was citing *both* the Eucharist and feminist ritualizers’ “small e eucharists.” Therefore, this one repertoiric performance – a set of prayers, singing, and gestures – contains several layers of meaning. Its symbols, like all ritual symbols, do not “mean” on a literal level but are made meaningful through performance, largely based on the pre-existing forms the ritual cites. Because this ritual cites more than one pre-existing form, its symbols acquire multiple meanings and can be read in various ways. Moreover, because the pilgrims are *performing* (and not, say, reading about) this ritual, their
individual and communal performances are also constituting the symbols’ and ritual’s meanings in new and different ways based on the ritualizers’ own backgrounds and beliefs. Thus, this ritual can mean many things simultaneously – and none of those meanings are wrong (or “right,” in the sense of “one true orthodoxy”). As Taylor puts it, “the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.” (20). Working in a mode of ritual paradox, the performance can both keep the actions’ “original” or “orthodox” meanings (i.e., the Eucharist) and transform those meanings in new ways (i.e., feminist bread-breaking). Thus, the bread can at one moment be just the “morsels of bread from rolls taken from breakfast” (Patterson 12), and be Christ’s body, and be manifestations of Christ’s love shared with one another, and be women’s daily lives made sacred. That which is impossible on a theoretical level (i.e., both-sacrament-and-not, both-bread-and-Christ’s body) is transformed into what is through the performance of ritual. This ritual therefore constitutes the pilgrims’ theologies about the Eucharist. However, because it is working on different levels and with different meanings for each participant, each woman’s performance constitutes – brings into being, transforms into what is – her own theological interpretations of what “bread-breaking” means, is, and can be, within and outside of the Eucharist.

Although it is a ritual, “the” Eucharist is so strictly codified that it is essentially archival and seems immutable. However, as these pilgrims’ bread-breaking reveals, its meaning is no more “unchanging” than any other bit of archived knowledge; it too is shaped through selection, interpretation, and transmission. As Taylor notes, “What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied. Bones might remain the same, even though their story might change” (19). In the same way, even when the form of the Eucharist remains more-or-less exactly the same each time, its “value,
relevance, [and] meaning” are not stable but are affected by interpretation and embodiment. The truth of this statement is illustrated by the changes in “value and meaning” commonly experienced by those who are given Eucharist by a woman priest. For example, whereas the male priest is often seen as the *imago Christi*, set apart from the ritual’s human recipients, the woman priest “comes to represent *both* divinity and humanity,” subtly affecting the ritual’s meaning (Raab 233). Through a shift in embodiment, the form’s “story” can change.

As a repertoiric performance, the pilgrims’ ritual also has the potential to shape and re-make the meaning of both Eucharist and “small e” bread-breaking. Taylor goes on:

> the repertoire, like the archive, is mediated. The process of selection, memorization or internalization, and transmission takes place within (and in turn helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation. Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group / generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge. (21)

The ritualizers’ selection of specific eucharistic elements and modes of transmission mediated this performance, constituting its new symbolic system by citing and re-presenting existing forms in new ways. Through the paradoxical power of ritual, many forms of the “embodied act” of bread-breaking (i.e., the orthodox form, feminist ritualizers’ new forms, and the pilgrims’ own, individualized forms) were all co-present, acquiring meaning through citation or what Taylor calls “a constant state of againness.” In this moment, the ritual performatively *generates* (or constitutes) knowledge and *transmits* that knowledge by making it visible through embodiment.
Performing bread-breaking in new, alternative ways gives the ritual new meanings. In so doing, it also constitutes new theology. As liturgists claim, “lex orandi, lex credendi” – that is, “‘worship shapes faith’; ‘as you pray, so you believe’” (Berger 220). The ways in which these women “do” theology or perform the repertoire (i.e., prayer, liturgy, and ritual) gives form to their theology. As Kobialka would have it, such “technologies of self-representation” make their inner truth (their spirituality) visible (98). Moreover, as Bell suggests, this ritual does not simply “act out” pre-existing belief, but actively constitutes it through performance.

For example, it is typical of the rituals performed by women (and other oppressed groups) that “they do not envisage or ritualize a reversal of power and exploitation” (that is, although those who do have power may ritually relinquish it and humble themselves, those without power over others rarely ritualize about gaining it) (Berry). As Bynum puts it, Turner’s theory of ritual inversion “assumes symmetry – that is, he assumes that the inferior are exactly the reverse of the superior. If the superior in society generate images of lowliness in liminality, the inferior will generate images of power” (109). However, “As recent liberation theologians have pointed out, it is the powerful who express imitation of Christ as (voluntary) poverty, (voluntary) nudity, and (voluntary) weakness” (109). In contrast, those without power – including women – tend to image “a different ordering of society, in which hierarchies are not reversed but abolished; and the imagery is not that of humiliation and triumph, but struggle” (Berry). This generalization plays out in the pilgrims’ ritual, in which they do not envisage gaining the power to control the sacraments, as male priests can. Instead, their ritual is a communal one, in which “We take, bless, break this bread and share it with each other” (Schenk 5). All who participate are equally authorized to bless the bread, to break it, and to share it – all tasks normally reserved for the presiding priest. In this way, the meaning of bread-breaking is
transformed, so that it constitutes, embodies, and celebrates the Gospel’s “radical equality” and non-hierarchical ordering of society. By citing religious symbols and forms (i.e., the Eucharist) but performing the ritual differently, the women constitute and perform new theology.

Their performance is a meaningful (i.e., “legible”) ritual because it cites and follows established forms – both the Catholic Eucharist and feminist ritual groups’ “small e eucharists.” As those different layers of meaning and interpretation are merged with the participants’ own identities and theologies, the performance, in a mode of ritual paradox, comes to mean many things at once. As the pilgrims highlight how fluid the repertoire (and even the archive) can be, they perform a challenge to the ritual’s codified orthodoxy and claim for themselves the right to ritualize and to constitute belief through embodied performance. This ritual is also transformative: not only does it transform the bread into something new, it also constitutes new theology about what “bread-breaking” is, what it can be, and how, when re-imagined, it can transform the church.

**Re-membering Prisca as “Priestly”**

This bread-breaking ritual is also transformative because, by linking the women’s ritual performances with Prisca’s church leadership, it redefines what it means to be “priestly” and who can legitimately perform this role. Earlier, the act of praying with Phoebe expanded for the pilgrims the church leadership roles they saw as “legitimate” and available to them as women. In similar ways, breaking bread with Prisca can expand “priestliness” for the pilgrims. By breaking bread, they perform their identities as “priestly,” in a way that is, although unorthodox, legitimized by re-membering Prisca. Prisca is a legitimate “player” in this ritual, despite her absence, because of ritual’s paradoxical power to make even those who are absent, long-ago, and
ideal present in the ritual moment. “Rituals invoke the participation of spirits, animals, deceased ancestors, or gods, not simply as objects of ritual attention but as performers in their own right” (Driver 121). Perhaps more importantly, the “universality or catholicity of the church is not only understood in terms of geography but also as transcending categories of space and time, earth and heaven,” which means that women can “be church” with their spiritual ancestors, not just with their “local gathered communities” (Watson 48). Therefore, “being there” with Prisca lets them constitute this identity in her name, in memory of her, and even with her.

For the pilgrims, this ritual is particularly meaningful because it is performed in catacomb associated with Prisca herself. Although the Priscilla remembered in the catacomb’s name was not Paul’s co-worker Prisca, it was nonetheless Prisca’s catacomb as well: Prisca’s bones “rested there until the ninth century” (Denzey 123). Thus, it was a site of early medieval pilgrimage to Prisca’s relics and in memory of her. For the pilgrims, then, Prisca’s importance as a church leader, and her own similar leadership over Eucharistic fellowship in her house church (as Paul’s mention suggests) is reflected in the fresco of the bread-breaking ceremony, even if the image is not specifically of her. The service notes state that “it is particularly appropriate for this prayer service to be used as a ‘small e eucharist’ for a small faith community or adapted for use in a parish Communion service” specifically because “Prisca most likely presided at eucharistic table fellowship in her home along with her husband Aquila” (4). That is, participants break bread in this way in memory of Prisca; their performance is legitimized in that it is a literal re-membering of a highly respected, orthodox-enough-for-Paul woman leader.

Although supported by the pilgrims’ connection to Prisca and their other spiritual ancestors, their ritual challenges the orthodox interpretation of Eucharistic fellowship as a
priest’s performance of a privileged sacrament. In place of this orthodoxy, the ritual risks new interpretations, not only of bread-breaking, but also of “priestliness” and women’s leadership.

First, the ritual suggests alternative interpretations of women’s ability to perform priestly roles in worship. Specifically, by re-membering or re-embodying a “priestly” (i.e., bread-breaking) Prisca and at the same time to perform the ritual of breaking bread is to constitute what “priestly” means by doing it. Thus, because women can constitute the meaning of “priestly” through their performances, they both are and can be – Vatican denials aside – priestly. In this moment and throughout their time in Rome, the pilgrims discovered that women had been respected as leaders in the early church. Schenk claimed that, on this journey, pilgrims “get right away that being a Christian leader was an equal-opportunity opportunity. […] Both women and men were called to this, and responded to this … this is a really important idea to spend time pondering.” Such a suggestion, that women can be and have been priests, is a radical idea. As Patterson puts it: “For the Catholic church, which says the priesthood is reserved for men because Jesus chose only men as his apostles and only men can image Jesus, this is touchy material. For women wanting to become priests in the Catholic church or who want other women to have the opportunity to be ordained, it’s heady stuff. Grist for their cause” (10). This ritual is a performance of challenge in that it reveals that the Church’s rituals – even those as codified as the Eucharist – are not fixed, natural, unchanging, or unmediated in the ways that their seemingly stable nature might suggest. Breaking bread in the Catacombs of Priscilla, in her memory and with other women, requires the pilgrims to “ponder” men’s and women’s equality in leadership and women’s ability to image and represent Jesus.

However, bread-breaking is not an abstract “pondering,” but an embodied practice of negotiating this idea by performing it. That is, the pilgrims “ponder” the fresco they see above
them, which can be interpreted as representing seven women celebrating an early Christian Eucharist, *by re-membering* that image. This communal act is “a sign and symbol of our desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus: doing justice, loving others, proclaiming the presence of the living God around us and within us” (“Prisca” 5). That is, it imagines all participants (not just the priest or presider) as *imago Christi*, images of Christ, able to “follow in the footsteps of Jesus” and do as he did: break bread, do justice, love others, and proclaim the presence of God. Importantly, “[w]omen’s experience of self interpreted as experience of God, fleshed out with values characteristic of women’s ways of being in the world, comes to a theological flashpoint when women begin to articulate and act in accord with their dignity as *imago Dei, imago Christi*” (Johnson 69). However, performance allows them to negotiate their role as *imago Dei*, the ambiguity of the image, and the limitations on priestliness that the image seems to contradict, *through the act of* blessing and breaking bread and sharing it with each other. Instead of discussing whether or not women can be ordained or debating the theological differences between priestly and pastoral roles, the women constitute their beliefs about priestly roles *by doing*. As they embody a “priestliness” that is communal, not hierarchical, they constitute a theology about the priesthood that makes such priestliness available to all.

By performing this priestliness and sharing bread with each other, they may also constitute *new* beliefs about who can “legitimately” break bread or whose priestly bread-breaking is ritually effective. That is, by performing in priestly ways, the pilgrims actively constitute their identities as priestly, or as bread-breakers. Moreover, because each identity performance is performative, it is able to constitute and perform “priestliness” in new ways, not as representations of a preexisting, orthodox performance mode. As Butler writes about gender acts and attributes, so to these attributes of gendered spirituality “are performative.” Borrowing
from Butler, this performative performance suggests that “there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of [bread-breaking], and the postulation of a true [priestly] identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. […] [Bread-breakings] can be neither true nor false” (192–93). Because the pilgrims experience their ritual as effective or transformative, they discover that it is not “false,” and that the orthodoxy that limits priestliness to ordination is “a regulatory fiction.”

This bread-breaking also allows the pilgrims to re-imagine the meaning of “priestliness,” not only in terms of ordination but also as this identity role may be constituted within an egalitarian community such as the first-century – and perhaps also the twenty-first-century – house church. As the pilgrims remembered and discovered “that Prisca probably did lead Eucharist celebrations at her house church” and broke bread in similar fashion, the ritual, Schenk suggested, helped them understand what it would have been like to worship in that way. Moreover, she said, the service is a “powerful connection with our origins, the origins of women’s leadership. […] This celebration had its own integrity within the context of a first-century house church when people broke bread and shared wine in memory of Jesus. […] For this purpose it […] was very appropriate in this setting.” Thus, one of the symbolic layers present in this ritual is the practice and meaning of bread-breaking within early Christian house churches. Performing the ritual in this way thus connects the pilgrims to their spiritual ancestors and “the origins of women’s leadership,” and allows them to physically reflect upon the many other forms and meanings that bread-breaking has had in the past.

Describing the pilgrims’ ritual, Schenk continued:

I think the power it does have is the recognition that we as a group can break bread and share wine in memory of Jesus, and not worry about who’s ordained, who’s not ordained. We can pray together, we can be a Christian community
together, and in very ordinary ways throughout our lives. It’s not only at Mass on Sundays. It’s one of those ways of recognizing that Christ’s presence is always among us, and that we have the power because of our baptism to corporally remember that presence.

That is, through the act of breaking bread, women come to recognize that they do have the spiritual authority to reclaim this ritual and to constitute it in unorthodox ways. As they break bread and recognize “Christ’s presence” in the act, even though it is performed in an alternative form and without the authority of a priest, the women may come to see that “presence” or the “power because of our baptism” as overriding powers, able to make the ritual effective and transformative no matter its form. To me, this suggests that some of the concerns over women’s ordination are, in some ways, irrelevant, in that women are already priestly, able to pray, to represent Christ’s presence, and to embody and re-member that presence through rituals such as bread-breaking. Although they may, for now, be limited to doing in a women-church group or a similar “Christian community,” these women are nonetheless able “to follow in the footsteps of Jesus: doing justice, loving others, proclaiming the presence of the living God around us and within us” (5). Through ritual, they discover, claim, and embody this spiritual authority.

However, women’s performances in the role of “priest,” whether formally or by sharing bread and wine at Eucharistic rituals, are not simply a matter of a different interpretation of history; instead, whether made explicitly or through performance, women’s claims that they too can perform as “priest” are tied up with difficult questions about women’s roles, femininity, sexuality, and even the gender of God. The 1976 Declaration excludes women from the priesthood largely on the grounds that women, in their female bodies, cannot “resemble” Christ’s male body. For this reason, women cannot perform the priesthood’s sacramental rituals; instead,
“The symbol of a woman at the altar” is threatening because it “would encourage an immanent female image of divinity and would also raise issues of sexuality for the church” (Raab 220). Torjesen agrees, arguing that “A woman, unlike a man, is perceived to be inseparable from her sexual nature, and as a priest she would bring sexuality into the realm of the sacred” (3). By embodying “priestly” roles in ritual and performing their identities as *imago Dei*, women’s bodies threaten to challenge orthodox declarations about gender roles and about women’s and men’s separate “natures,” as well as implied ideas about the masculinity of God and the dangerous sexuality of women. Understanding Church declarations against women’s ordination as human inventions and interpretations, not as “the way it has *always* been” or “the only way it can be,” allows women to challenge the orthodoxy of those declarations. Instead of seeing female bodies as unable to “resemble” Christ and in need of a male to mediate between them and God, they performatively constituted and brought into existence, even temporarily, a church based in equality, justice, and liberation, in which women’s experiences and bodies are no lesser than men’s in their ability to approach God, consecrate the sacraments, and celebrate the Eucharist. By breaking bread with Prisca, these women are challenging and re-defining women’s roles and the “appropriate” performance of femininity and the female body.

These performances of alternative identities and theologies create a “counter-orthodoxy” that is potentially heretical in its dissent from orthodoxy. However, as these performances and interpretations of bread-breaking and women’s priestliness become more common, the “true, unquestionable” orthodoxy begins to shift to accommodate – or be transformed by – the “alternative” interpretations. This is what Raab is talking about when she writes this: “It is my conviction that women priests will not be officially permitted in the Catholic Church until there are woman priests. In other words, Catholic women must be seen in a priestly role, in particular
celebrating the Eucharist in order to be approved and ordained as priests” (220). As women perform pilgrimages that make the history of women church leaders visible and as they perform priestly rituals, and as first Episcopal and then Catholic women were “irregularly” ordained, they may shift the orthodox view on this subject because their performances reveal that women have been and can be priests – that this is not an impossibility because it is already possible. This correlates with the view that ritual is transformative because it brings the future, the “could be,” into the present. As that as-yet-untrue “ought to be” is given shape, it becomes what “is,” even for a moment – which reveals that it is possible after all, and thus allows it to become true. 8

Prisca is also a useful model for these women’s performances because she herself was also challenging and re-defining her own culture’s limited roles allowed to women and its other ideas about gender, sexuality, and holiness. Because “the quest for honor and precedence associated with public office was viewed as an exclusively masculine enterprise,” a woman “exercising public authority could be accused of projecting a masculine personality; but, even worse, she could be called unchaste” (Torjesen 7). Perhaps the church leader Prisca, the deacon Phoebe, the apostle Junia, the Bishop Theodora, and the other preachers and priests remembered as “spiritual ancestors” were themselves accused of such “masculine” immodesty, but they served the church nonetheless. Torjesen suggests that, despite “orthodox” Roman ideas about gender roles, women were able to challenge and re-write these ideas through their performances as leaders within their homes and churches. For example, “society insisted that a respectable

8 Interestingly, some would suggest that the ritual’s “unorthodoxy” is itself necessary to church order. Schillebeeckx argues that “against the background of the existing church order, new and perhaps urgently necessary alternative possibilities can usually be seen only through the medium of what must provisionally be called ‘illegality’. This is not a new phenomenon in the church; things have always been that way. […] Thus from the history of the church it seems that there is a way in which Christians can develop a practice in the church from below, from the grass-roots, which for a times can compete with the official practice recognized by the church, but which in its Christian opposition and illegality can eventually nevertheless become the dominant practice of the church, and finally be sanctioned by the official church (whereupon the whole process can begin all over again, since time never stands still). That is how things have always been!” (400–401).
woman be concerned about her reputation for chastity and her seclusion in the household” and “Public activities and public roles seemed incompatible with modesty.” Despite these limitations, Torjesen argues, “real women of that time led lives that were not as circumscribed as we might think. As householders they directed the men and women who lived and worked under their authority and supervised the production and distribution of the wealth,” and they performed similar leadership functions within their house churches and missionary work (12).

As these pilgrims break bread with Prisca, they are reminded of her willingness to serve and lead in the church in whatever ways she was equipped to do, no matter how unorthodox or “unfeminine” those ways might be. Her identity performances were not limited to what her church or society believed to be orthodox, legitimate “women’s roles.” Instead, as do the contemporary women who emulate and re-member them, women leaders in the early church performed their gendered, spiritual identity in alternative ways, challenging the societal norms that were used to limit and enforce women’s performances. By re-membering Prisca through performance and constituting knowledge by breaking bread with her, the pilgrims claim the same right that Prisca did: to perform their identities as women in the church in ways that they believe will allow them to answer God’s call, regardless of how “masculine” or “immodest” those performances might seem. Seeing Prisca’s example within the context of its culture, they come to understand that priestliness is not dependent upon authority, but can be performed independent of “orthodoxy.” Instead, Prisca’s example of priestliness – significant leadership in the early church, likely including leading bread-breaking rituals in the church that met in her home – provides a powerful “model” for the pilgrims. Therefore, by performing as Prisca, the pilgrims constitute a new definition of what “priestliness” is and a new, priestly performance of gendered, spiritual identity. In addition, the ritual of re-membering Prisca and breaking bread with her
reveals that women are priestly, expands the range of “legitimate” women’s roles in the church, and legitimizes their own alternative, bread-breaking performances of priestliness.

**Connecting with Spiritual Ancestors**

Schenk’s description of the service as a “powerful connection with our origins, the origins of women’s leadership” is not limited to a “connection” with Prisca, but extends to include the other women who have gathered in or are remembered by the Catacombs of Priscilla – the seven unknown figures breaking bread in the *Fractio Panis* fresco, the other women painted onto the catacomb walls, the women who designed and met in this space in the second century, and the early medieval women who pilgrimaged here to pray with Prisca’s bones. Thus, the third way that the pilgrims’ bread-breaking ritual is transformative is that it physically connects the women with their spiritual ancestors who long ago worshiped the same place in similar ways, gives them a community, and situates them and their ritual within history.

This “powerful connection” to “the origins of women’s leadership” is epitomized by the pilgrims’ breaking bread with each other and, through memory, with the bread-breaking women represented in the fresco before them. This painting is an archival record of women’s Eucharistic practices, committing their performances to memory by archiving them; by breaking bread in this catacomb, the pilgrims reinscribe the fresco’s archived practice upon their own bodies, singing the ancient women back to life and returning their performance to the again-living repertoire. By performing rituals that are inspired by and in the tradition of the women represented on these walls, the pilgrims claim their part in an alternative, mostly erased “spiritual heritage” and ancestry – one that affirms, rather than denying, their “ministerial calling” (as the Vatican Declaration puts it) and places it in line with the frescoed women’s similar “calling.”
While this symbolic layer alone is powerful, it is not the only way in which the pilgrims were connecting to the sacred site’s ancient women. The Catacombs of Priscilla are especially remarkable in that, as Schenk paraphrased Denzey, they “preserved a sort of women’s space when it came to worship.” Grounded in this interpretation of the catacomb’s meaning, Schenk suggested that the bread-breaking ritual “was meant to evoke the presence of Christ in […] a very sacred setting, especially for women.” Because of this setting’s “sacred” history, pilgrimage and performance work together and build upon each other. That is, the pilgrimage would have been less effective without this ritual, but so too would this ritual have been less effective if performed at home instead of in this sacred space. “The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). By “being there,” performatively re-imagining the spiritual ancestors who have also worshiped in the same space, and “singing them back to life” through the performance of what Denzey describes as “feminist midrash,” the pilgrims become “part of the transmission” of knowledge that includes both them and the site’s larger community of women. This site of ancient women’s worship allows the pilgrims to perform and experience a direct, overt, almost tangible connection between the ancient women and themselves.

Denzey supports her assertion that the bread-breaking fresco’s seven figures are women not only through analyzing the figures’ clothing and hairstyles, as others have done, but by seeing it within its immediate visual context, which she interprets as a sacred women’s space. The Greek Chapel that houses the *Fractio Panis* also contains several other frescoes, many of which are highly unusual in catacomb art, including an image of the healed paralytic carrying his pallet on his back and one of the three Magi bringing gifts to the infant Jesus on Mary’s lap. There are also three images traditionally identified as representing Susanna (from the apocryphal
book of Susanna), but which Denzey hypothesizes may have represented Mary Magdalene witnessing Jesus’ resurrection and Paul’s co-worker Prisca being ordained and preaching. There is also an image that Wilpert identified as Daniel by the lion’s den, but that Denzey sees as the Roman woman Thecla (from the third-century text Acts of Paul and Thecla). Denzey identifies two themes uniting these images. The first is

God’s deliverance of the faithful from peril: Noah, Moses striking the rock, Abraham and Isaac, the three Hebrews [in the fiery furnace], Daniel in the lion’s den, and Susanna all provide examples of individuals whom God rescues in their hour of need. […] A second unifying theme […] is perhaps even more apparent: many of the room’s scenes feature women prominently. (105)

Noting the many images she identifies as women, including the chapel’s patroness (represented in a small portrait of a woman over the room’s entrance) and the women breaking bread, Denzey argues that this chapel was a sacred space for women, who may have designed the room, commissioned the paintings, and held worship services or (more likely) funerary vigils there.

Denzey’s analysis and interpretation of the images reveals not only the astoundingly high proportion of images of women, but some images that feature women in unusual ways. For example, while images of Lazarus’s resurrection are common, the Greek Chapel’s version is the only image in all of catacomb art to also feature his sisters Mary and Martha. Denzey suggests that “one of the artists who painted the biblical scenes appears to have literally refigured traditional iconography to highlight or emphasize women’s activity in the church” (105). In this way, these long-lost women re-saw the archive and re-wrote orthodoxy – even Scripture – to image God as a liberating rescuer and to see themselves (and their own spiritual ancestors) reflected in Judeo-Christian history.
Re-seeing the archive of church history, as the chapel’s first women seem to have done, would have allowed those women to perform their identities in alternative ways. Denzey’s “midrash” illustrates this possibility eloquently:

There they meditated on the salvific work and examples of every significant woman in early Christian history: Jesus’s disciples Mary, Martha, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and two of the most holy women associated with the apostle Paul: Thecla and Prisca.

The women who sat in silent vigil in this room never held substantial power in the Roman church. But they had found a place of their own; it was a space for reverential glances backward to perhaps what some considered a more potent age. There, in that space, powerful female teachers still left a residue, a sacred vapor trail of sanctity. Prisca’s bones were there, and the images of her sisters were almost as indelible as bone. Their traditions and memories still thrived, in the hearts of Rome’s ordinary Christian women, sitting in subterranean darkness. (124)

Denzey’s descriptions of the Catacombs of Priscilla and the small Greek Chapel reveal this about the chapel’s first users: they seem to have been a small group of women who met away from the official church to worship, pray, break bread, and/or hold vigil. They re-read the textual archive of sacred scriptures, seeking out and actively “pondering” on those stories that revealed the significant leadership and “salvific work” of women. And because they painted their own bread-breaking ritual on the same walls as the paintings of Mary, Thecla, and Prisca, they saw their own spiritual performance practices as in line with or justified by those of their own spiritual ancestors. These lost women, therefore, have left behind traces of a gendered and spiritual identity performance that makes for an amazing model for contemporary pilgrims to re-member.
Because of the traces of ritual and identity performances left by the site’s spiritual ancestors, the FutureChurch pilgrims who perform bread-breaking in this sacred space can see their rituals not as new (i.e., illegitimate), but as ways of “standing on the shoulders” of other Christian women and their alternative, but legitimate, performances. As these pilgrims found themselves surrounded by images of women who were “an integral part of the proclamation of the gospel,” they performed their connection to other, long-lost women who also re-saw the archive and challenged its orthodoxy (Schüssler Fiorenza, “In Search” 30). By meditating on the stories of sacred women leaders imaged on the chapel’s walls and by re-reading those stories as celebrations of “God’s deliverance of the faithful” from oppression and of God’s call to women to participate in the telling of the Gospel, the pilgrims perform their gendered and spiritual identities in ways modeled by the chapel’s first users. Performing their rituals and identities in this space and as a continuation of its history also legitimizes both their theology, which sees God as liberating, and their subsequent identity performances as liberated justice-seekers.

For Schenk and, presumably, for the pilgrims who traveled with her, the Catacombs of Priscilla were understood as a sacred space and a site of women’s worship. In light of this, I read the bread-breaking ceremony as this pilgrimage’s central transformative ritual. In this moment, the pilgrims traveled to a sacred space where they remembered their spiritual ancestors, including Prisca and the site’s other women. They re-membered those women by re-embodying their ancient worship ritual in the same site it had been performed nearly two millennia ago. By breaking bread with Prisca, they re-constituted what bread-breaking is and what it means to be “priestly,” and expanded their definitions of those spiritual performances to include women. Then, sitting on the ancient women’s stone bench, imaginatively engaging with the same images that those women had meditated upon, and praying and bread-breaking as a group of women in
the same sacred space where those other women had come to pray and break bread, the pilgrims were using repertoiric performance to “be there” and to create and transmit knowledge (about God and about women) with these other, long-lost women. Through the repertoire’s power to “know differently” and ritual’s paradoxical power to bring the past into the present, the pilgrims gained a community of ancestors; they reclaimed their culture and its stories through performance and embodiment. By breaking bread with Prisca and performing their identities with the chapel’s other women, the pilgrims used the repertoire as a “way of knowing” about the past. By engaging in repertoiric performance with these women – and not just gazing upon their archived ritual painted into the wall above – the pilgrims performed their connection to the ancient women, claiming them as spiritual ancestors whose re-membered, orthodox worship practices legitimizd the pilgrims’ own performances of their spiritual, gendered identities.

USING PERFORMANCE TO RESPOND TO OPPRESSION BRINGS HEALING

The end goal of ritual is transformation, and indeed, the purpose of this pilgrimage is the transformation of its participants. While this transformation may be seen in obvious ways, as we will see in the next section, Driver also notes that “There are many other kinds of transformance not usually though of as rites of passage. They may occur repeatedly in a lifetime – rituals of spiritual and moral cleansing for example, and closely related to those, rituals of healing” (95). In as much as it effects healing, therefore, the pilgrimage may be understood as transformative.

As Christian feminists have made clear, religious traditions can be oppressive to women when they fail to tell women’s histories, because this lacuna limits the identity performances that are seen as available to or legitimate for women in the church. I suggest that as they use pilgrimage and ritual to uncover, interpret, and connect with traces of women’s lost history, these
pilgrims’ own alternative identity performances are legitimized. In this way, the pilgrimage’s work of reclaiming women leaders and re-reading Roman artifacts through the belief that the early church was egalitarian is healing because it makes room for these women to perform their identities in holistic ways, and then to confess those identities openly within a community of like-minded women. Such work is important because it not only influences these women’s self-performance but also, ideally, shapes the possibilities for gender roles within the Church itself.

The FutureChurch pilgrimage is an embodied critique of ‘inherited oppressions,” namely the silencing of women and the failure to tell women’s stories throughout church history. For the participants, recognizing and naming this practice not as “simply the way things are” but as harmful and in need of reform is a powerful first step toward transformation. In this vein, Schüssler Fiorenza describes her work:

The Bible is not just a historical collection of writings but also Holy Scripture, gospel, for Christians today. As such it informs not only theology but also the commitment of many women today. Yet as long as the stories and history of women in the beginnings of early Christianity are not theologically conceptualized as an integral part of the proclamation of the gospel, biblical texts formulated and codified by men will remain oppressive to women. (“In Search” 30)

That is, an erasure of women from the history of the gospel is not an innocuous omission; it is a lacuna that oppresses women and affects their religious commitment – that is, their performance of spiritual identity. When “the proclamation of the gospel” is “codified” as the story of men, women are disallowed from seeing themselves as having any role in this proclamation, either in the early church or today. Schenk describes such erasure as “sexist, whether you like it or not, and then it’s tradition, and then it’s sacred tradition!” When the masculinity of church history is
perceived as “sacred tradition,” she suggests, it is particularly difficult for women to conceive of their gendered spiritual identity as “integral” to religious life. Therefore, being “without a history” limits women’s identity performances by marking some as “illegitimate.” When the threat of “illegitimacy” prevents women from performing their identities fully, or causes them to attempt to separate their gendered identity from their spiritual self, it prevents wholeness.

FutureChurch sees the omission of women’s stories from church history, common both to the Roman Catholic lectionary and to typical studies of scripture and history, as a serious problem, and much of its work is directly aimed towards reclaiming these stories (through creating the “Celebrating Women Witnesses” project and taking pilgrimage to Rome, for example). Schenk said that recovering women’s histories and stories is important in all parts of history, but is “doubly important in sacred history. […] In a faith community, your inner being and meaning is linked to those early stories in your faith tradition. […] If you’re not represented, then] a big part of your being isn’t there, is unfulfilled, not validated – no matter how much you admire the men, you need to see yourself there to be fully integrated.” The fact that this community of women is “without a history” is understood as oppressive, but this is complicated and heightened because their religious history is at stake; this limits or illegitimizes women’s identity performances, not just as women but as women in relation to God.

Recovering women’s history and re-seeing the ways in which women’s stories are told is crucial to Schenk and FutureChurch because, she said,

most women, Catholic women – we identify ourselves as not being there, or we were the sinner, or the five-times-divorced woman … but it was really through this woman that Samaria came back to faithfulness, or to understand who Jesus was. […] But unfortunately the message that most people get is that this was a
sinful divorcée. So many times, the messages that women get in the lectionary are, I don’t want to say pejorative, but subversive to the dignity of women. According to feminist theology, practices that are “subversive to the dignity of women” by making women seem absent or by interpreting women’s histories in ways focused on sexuality instead of spirituality must be critically analyzed and, when appropriate, rejected as oppressive.9

On its website, FutureChurch quotes theologian Marjorie Proctor-Smith: “When the church makes a lectionary, when it chooses which stories to tell and which stories to leave out, it gives to us or withholds from us the stories we need to make our lives. More often than not, women live on the margins of the texts, in the spaces between the words of men, in the silences and oblique glances.” By allowing women to see themselves as “marginal” to the story of Christianity, the lectionary (or even the Bible itself) can, according to such theology, cause women to be “unfulfilled” or “not validated” by “withholding” from women “the stories [they] need” to shape their performances of identity and “to make [their] lives.”

FutureChurch’s pilgrimage to Rome embraces the converse of this logic: discovering and claiming women’s stories, or “choosing which stories to tell,” grants women the power to see themselves as “an integral part of the proclamation of the gospel.” Reclaiming stories or history through performance leads to healing because it allows women to perform their identities as Christian women in ways other than “marginal” to men, and to “make their lives” in “fully integrated” ways. Schenk suggested that this pilgrimage is “geared so women can see themselves in church history”; thus, it is an embodied performance of the belief that there are women’s stories – that women have been “faithful witnesses” and have participated in the life

9 In her previous work as a nurse-midwife, Schenk also identified the oppressive force of patriarchy in the lives of “women who didn’t have a sense of identity apart from being someone’s wife or girlfriend.” For her, women whose identity performances are shaped as “marginal” to men – whether to husbands or to priests – cannot experience the “wholeness of being human.”
and leadership of the church. In this way, telling these stories is a performance of challenge to orthodox performance limitations and a way of countering the oppression of marginality. By discovering and drawing attention to the fact that traces of these women still exist, the pilgrims’ rituals perform what they believe will be transformative in their own lives and in the life of the church: remembering and reclaiming women leaders as legitimate models for performances of identity as women and as Catholics. Pilgrimage is a performative stand against oppression because it re-reads the archive, highlight an alternative history that celebrates women’s performances, and re-members those women’s alternative performances through ritual. In doing so, it gives women a community of spiritual ancestors and ways of seeing themselves in history.

Throughout the pilgrimage, participants found that discovering traces of women’s history and ritually re-membering ancient women leaders was healing; it gave them a history and a culture, or, as Proctor-Smith put it, “the stories we need to make our lives.” For women who had only ever seen themselves as marginal to the story of the gospel and its “proclamation,” or whose participation in church life was limited due to feelings of oppression or exclusion, reclaiming the existence of women’s stories and re-membering their value to church history can be powerful. Schenk suggested that for her, “the value” of this pilgrimage and its rituals was in “what is it doing to the internal self awareness of women and men.” For example, she described one pilgrim who, as they were leaving St. Praxedis, came up to her in tears and exulted, “we really were there, they can’t say that we weren’t!” Schenk agreed that seeing the mosaics in person and pondering the importance of Theodora Episcopa and other leaders, as this pilgrim had, “hits you in a very different way, it heals you – there’s a very deep healing [of] that marginalization we internalize very young. […] We] don’t even know that [this wholeness is] missing until a piece falls into place.” As this pilgrim discovered, knowing about Theodora Episcopa was not enough;
instead, as she stood side-by-side with Theodora, Mary, Praxedis, and Pudentiana (the women pictured in this church’s mosaic) and prayed with them and with Phoebe, she constituted knowledge about women’s history with these women by re-membering and embodying them.

Unearthing these women’s lives from the confines of the archive, where they have been ignored or interpreted differently (if not suppressed outright), and restoring them to the repertoire of feminist theology and women’s history through ritualizing and storytelling, allows women to claim their part in the church and to perform their gendered and spiritual identities in integrated, “whole” ways. As Schenk suggested, through recovering this history and reclaiming spiritual ancestors, the pilgrims felt that “the full humanity of women being validated, for ourselves […] in the fullness of our femaleness.” As they recovered and re-membered women’s history as a legitimate part of church history – not as marginal – the pilgrims experienced the “wholeness of being human” (Schenk). As they ritualized in the Catacombs of Priscilla, they did not simply learn about women’s history, but performed rituals and so became part of that community.

For many participants, the discovery of traces of women’s leadership was particularly empowering. The 2007 brochure quotes a pilgrim who traveled the previous year: “I came home with a renewed sense of liberation… seeing with my own eyes what we have not been shown: the early church enjoyed the full participation of women in all leadership roles.” Similarly, Schenk talked “about how healing it is for Christian women to realize that their exclusion from leadership was not always the case” (Patterson 11). “For Catholic women,” she told me, “this is very meaningful stuff.” Specifically, it expands the bounds of “legitimate” identity performance available to these women, and upholds the orthodoxy of their distinctly non-orthodox identity performances as priestly women church leaders. As they prayed with Phoebe and broke bread with Prisca, they did not simply read about early women leaders who performed alternative
gendered and spiritual roles; they *ritually embodied* those women and claimed those alternative performances as legitimate options for themselves.

Schenk and other pilgrims also suggested that recovering and re-membering the history of “women who are church” (as Schüssler Fiorenza would put it) can be transformative in the church, as well. Standing in the catacombs, Schenk was struck by the realization that “those tombs hold real women – it was like a connection from across the centuries, very [...] personally meaningfully, personally empowering – these women have a story to tell, they were suppressed [...] if there’s a way we can tell their stories,” then telling those stories and “setting the record straight” is, she claimed, “going to be very healing” to the Church’s “institutionalized sexism.” Similarly, she suggested that “she and FutureChurch members hope to see a change in what they call the ‘systematic inequality of women’ in the church” (Glatz). For her, then, the rituals celebrated on and encouraged by this pilgrimage – “telling the stories” of long-forgotten women leaders – are an active way of performing her critical analysis of “institutionalized sexism.”

The pilgrimage’s liturgies and rituals were also transformative because they constituted a theology of God as faithful. Whereas Schenk and her fellow pilgrims rejected “institutionalized sexism” and “marginality” as oppressive, they celebrated traces of women’s leadership as representative of the gospel’s “radical vision” of equality – an egalitarianism that is truly orthodox, despite having been elided by the oppressive traditions of patriarchy and hierarchy. For example, Schenk and Irvin grounded their claims that the very early church may have allowed men and women to perform equal duties in the church in their belief that “Jesus wanted to overturn or reform hierarchical or elitist cultural norms. Jesus walked with social outcasts proclaiming the good news that women, slaves and the poor are fully human, Irvin said. The Gospel was meant to set people free ‘and it did at first,’ she said” (Glatz). This egalitarian vision
of Jesus’ gospel mission and the first-century church, so central to feminist theology, is both constituted and claimed through prayer and ritual, and also legitimizes the pilgrims’ rituals and identity performances by framing them as in line with the gospel.

The pilgrims were also encouraged by representations of women leaders because they reflected God’s liberating “faithfulness.” FutureChurch describes how “Prayer services at each site deepened our awareness of God’s faithfulness to women leaders in the 21st century as well as in the first” (“Rome Pilgrims”). Just as the women who celebrated in the Catacombs of Priscilla may, Denzey theorized, have meditated on the intertwined themes of God’s protection of oppressed peoples and God’s call to women, the contemporary pilgrims saw in these frescoes the continued promise of God’s liberation. This is echoed by Schenk’s insistence that “while the church might be sexist, God isn’t!” By celebrating a God who is faithful to the oppressed as the same God who calls women to faithful service and leadership, the pilgrims legitimized their identity performances as priestly women: not as rebellious dissenters, but as faithful women who continue to respond to God’s call to be liberators.

As these women came to see themselves in priestly roles and re-saw Church history and archaeological evidence as supporting, not denying, women’s Church leadership, they constituted their identities and their relationship with God in new ways. By claiming, appealing to, and constituting knowledge with their spiritual ancestors through ritual, they expanded the range of identity performances that are “legitimately” available to them and were able to perform their gender and their spirituality as holistic and intertwined, not artificially separated or limited by orthodoxy. All of these transformative performances are healing: they allow women to constitute their alternative gender identities in line with their faith or their sense of “calling,” in ways that the archive alone – with its refusal of ambiguity – denies.
These gains are also healing and transformative because they make room for women not only to perform but also to claim their gendered, spiritual identities in new and alternative ways— that is, to confess themselves. I have been discussing the pilgrims’ performances largely within the “ritual mode”; however, according to Driver, performance also exists in the “confessional” and “ethical” modes. Driver says that “The ritual mode of performance gives rise to the confessional by the implicit question: ‘Who are you who do these ritual things, and what is your business in doing them?’ When the moral identity of the ritualizers comes to be openly acknowledged by them, the confessional mode of performance begins” (113). For Driver, confessional performance is the identification of one’s identity. In ritual performance, “any and all things are possible,” and so ritual only “assumes some kind of answer” to these questions (114). Confessional performance, on the other hand, is both to answer these questions and to demonstrate where one stands. Confession is not only to take a stand subjectively but also to come out with it. Sometimes, perhaps most times, the coming out makes possible the subjective stand. There is a certain sense, an immensely important one, in which who we are waits upon who we say we are. When we perform ourselves, we do not simply express what we already are: We perform our becoming, and become our performing. There is fate in this, and freedom, too, and something of mystery. (114)

For the pilgrims, I suggest, the bread-breaking ritual is also a confessional performance because the women identify themselves to each other as “one who is able to break bread” (even if they do not use the word “priestly”) and then demonstrate that stand. Their “coming out” as bread-breakers may enable them to identify themselves as such. In doing so, they perform themselves as women who are becoming priestly bread-breakers, and they become such by performing it.
This act of confession is particularly important for these women because “[c]onfessional performance is an early, necessary step in the liberation of any oppressed people. I am speaking of acts in which people openly proclaim their identity as members of an oppressed group, and proclaim loyalty to the cause of liberation” (Driver 116). By identifying themselves with their spiritual ancestors and naming themselves as members of this group whose histories and stories have been silenced, they begin to work toward “liberation.” This communal identity is central to confession: “In the confessional mode, selfhood is both personal and communal. It is performance that insures that the confession does not refer solely, or even mainly, to the individual self. As performance, the confession finds, or perhaps makes, its community, so that the situation of the individual comes to be seen as something the community shares” (118). As these women align themselves with a wider community, their identity performances are made meaningful within a group of people who confess themselves in similar ways. For it to be transformational, such confessional performance cannot be kept private (as within prayer or the “confessional booth”), because it is “insignificant if it does not assist human communities struggling to maintain their identity and cast off bonds of oppression. Arising from the ritual mode, the confessional mode of performance drives onward toward the ethical” (120). Whereas the pilgrims may have experienced their ritual performances as personally healing and their confessional performances as constituting them within a community, it is their ethical performances that will be even more recognizable as “transformative.”

TRANSFORMATIVE PERFORMANCES OF WOMEN’S PRESENCE

These pilgrims are what Berger calls “dissident daughters” – women who remain connected to the church, but work to challenge, critique, reform, and renew it from within. Such
dissidence to church authority and orthodoxy rarely comes naturally within a culture where that authority is positioned as ultimate and unquestionable; instead, women become so only when they begin to critically analyze this authority, name it as oppressive or flawed, re-interpret its archive, and claim their own authority to ritualize and develop symbols and images grounded in God’s immanence and women’s lived experience. Adapting de Beauvior’s insight “One is not born, but becomes, a woman,” Berger begins Dissident Daughters, her study of women’s liturgies in a global context, with the recognition that “Dissident daughters are made, not born” (ix). Indeed, women are not born “dissident,” in disagreement with the traditional orthodoxies that make up their world, but are made so through ritual, including both liturgy and pilgrimage.

The “dissidence” born out of feminist theology’s rituals, liturgies, and pilgrimages often manifests itself both through wider transformation. Feminist ritualists and theorists frequently speak of ritual as transformative. For example, “Diann Neu asserts: ‘The ritual does what it says it does’; Marjorie Procter-Smith argues that liturgy and ritual are or can be powerful agents of liberation; Northup sees ritual as effective in social change” (Berry).

“Dissident daughters” are typically characterized by their active response to personal healing, including their commitment to continued ritualizing and their work to make women’s presence more visible in the church. In this way, shaping one’s identity performance in new ways is seen as a natural outgrowth of ritual. For example, one of the FutureChurch pilgrims, Katherine Paul, discussed

the idea and image of pilgrimage. Every pilgrimage is about two things, she said.

Who is God for me, and who am I for God?
The first involves the more spiritual aspect: How is it one understands and interprets God? The second is a more activist side. “What am I to do with this?” is a variant on the question of “Who am I for God?” Paul said. (Patterson 13)

Paul’s first “aspect,” recognizing and responding to the ways in which “one understands and interprets God,” reflects the first three aims of the pilgrimage as I have discussed them above: to search for suppressed history and its revelations about God’s faithfulness, to risk new interpretations of tradition in light of that discovered history, and to critically analyze those historiographies and traditions that keep one from knowing God, replacing oppressive traditions with those that reveal God’s goodness and faithfulness. Paul’s second aspect, questioning “What am I to do with this?,” is a reflection of the pilgrimage’s fourth aim: to respond to healing by embracing transformative performances.

It is revealing that Paul equates a question about one’s identity – “Who am I for God?” – with one about one’s performance – “What am I to do with this?” Indeed, the pilgrims’ understandings of their identities as Catholic women cannot be separated from their performances of that identity. As Butler would have it, “true” identities do not exist as separate from embodiment; because “there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured,” identity performances “can be neither true nor false” (Butler 192–93). Instead, identity is constituted through performance, so that how one performs one’s identity, gendered or otherwise, is one’s identity. Therefore, what these pilgrims do, through ritual and performance, constitutes who they are (or who they become) as “dissident daughters.” Pilgrimage and ritual are transformative because as these women perform new ideas about priestliness or spiritual ancestors through ritual, they may become priestly or part of a spiritual community in new ways. As they constitute their identity as “dissident daughters” through re-seeing the archive, ritually
re-membering spiritual ancestors, or constituting new theologies through performance, pilgrimage becomes a ritual performance of “becoming” – not a snap change from one identity to a new one, but an ongoing process of transforming one’s identity by performing it differently.

If what women do shapes who they become, then the converse is also true: who they become shapes what they do. Through pilgrimage, these women embrace an alternative vision of who they are as central, not marginal, to the history and work of the gospel; this directly informs what they will do with that newly legitimized vision. After re-interpreting the archive and coming to “know differently” through repertoiric performance, it is notable that what they do next is not codify a new archive. Instead, they embrace performance. For example, “Christian feminists must first reclaim the ekklēsia as our own community, heritage, theology, and spirituality before we are able to name the divine differently” (Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship 12). Instead of writing a new theology and committing it to the archive, these women – the pilgrims and others like them – continue to constitute their theology and identity through ritual.

**Claiming the Right to Ritual**

What these “dissident daughters” do, then, is largely twofold. Their first transformative response is to claim their right to ritualize. Inspired by the pilgrimage’s “healing” rituals and the powerful ways in which a ritual such as breaking bread with other women allowed them to risk new interpretations of oppressive traditions, these pilgrims may join the many other women who turn to the development of ritual and liturgy as a means of “empower[ing] themselves and other women” (Wessinger 6). As they critique and reject traditions and symbols they find oppressive, marginalizing, or detrimental to their ability to know God, feminist Christian women often use ritual and liturgy to create and celebrate new traditions and symbols, ones that are “empowering”
or celebrate their lived experiences as sacred reflections of God’s immanence. These “deep symbols and symbolic actions” are necessary, Ruether claims, because they help “to guide and interpret the actual experience of the journey from sexism to liberated humanity” (Women-Church 3). That is, as these pilgrims have discovered, symbols and rituals are tools for to the construction and performance of one’s identity.

Furthermore, women’s struggle to claim the right to determine their own rituals and symbols (or even, in the case of breaking bread with Prisca, to claim that symbols can be ambiguous and multi-layered) is a performance of challenge, and a struggle for the power to determine their own religious lives and the ways in which they can shape and perform their gendered, spiritual identities. Especially because ritual authority and symbolic determination within the Christian tradition have been “the prerogative of a male priesthood” or “a caste of liturgical experts,” Berger writes, women’s claim to “ritual authority” and their use of ritual to construct and interpret their “liturgical lives” and spiritual identities is a primary mode of claiming power. To put it differently, women have moved from liturgical consumption and reproduction to production, as they grasped liturgy as a crucial site for the negotiation of faith and feminism. Claiming women’s rites has involved a recognition both of the regulatory power of the traditional liturgy and of worship as a potential site of alternative and oppositional liturgical practices. (14)

In embracing their power and authority to create new symbols that are equally legitimate in their reflection of God, these pilgrims claim “the ‘right to ritual,’” which Catherine Bell calls the “‘symbolic equivalent of the right to vote and receive equal pay’” (qtd. in Berger 13).
Often, these “dissident daughters” – feminist Christians who are, as Ruether puts it, “defecting in place” – may do so by coming together to create “unofficial,” unorthodox religious practices within a house church or ritualizing community. In their conversation with NPR’s Sylvia Poggioli, two FutureChurch pilgrims revealed that their active response to the pilgrimage’s transformation would be through house-church ritualizing:

POGGIOLI: The visit to Rome’s early Christian sites had a profound impact on the pilgrims. Marie Sweeney, a former nun, said it inspired her to be even more active in her house church.

SWEENEY: That means that there are faithful and dissident Catholics gathering together in people's homes to celebrate Eucharist, to pray, to encourage each other, to be involved in their ministerial work beyond that prayer.

POGGIOLI: It sort of sounds like you're going back to the catacombs.

SWEENEY: Yes, we are. We're going back to our roots.

POGGIOLI: Before coming on the pilgrimage, Patricia Straw Wheatley had been weary about joining religious groups outside of the official church.

WHEATLEY: I needed to see the historical background before I could do anything with the underground activities. Now it's real and I am incredibly excited.

In these comments, Sweeney and Wheatley acknowledge this response as “dissident” and “underground,” but they also claim it as “faithful,” “Catholic,” and legitimized by the history and “roots,” in the form of spiritual ancestors, the pilgrimage uncovered and re-membered. Such groups are becoming increasingly common; in her study of *WomenEucharist*, Dierks identifies over one hundred regular group gatherings in which women share the Eucharist with each other, and Raab lists “celebrating the Eucharist ‘unofficially,’ i.e., without consecration by a priest” as
one of the three main ways in which “women are becoming more visible in priestly roles” (230, 227). In ritualizing and sharing the Eucharist with communities of women, pilgrims such as Sweeney and Wheatley are searching out alternative wisdom in the form of feminist theology and embodiment of the sacred; risking new interpretations of traditions, including the meaning of priesthood and of bread-breaking; performing their identities in new ways, as “women priests,” women leaders in the church, or members of an egalitarian “priesthood of all believers”; and claiming their right to healing and wholeness through the powers of ritual and symbol creation.

The transformative power of such rituals, whether on pilgrimage or in house churches, is that they perform and give shape to “what will be,” the ideal future, in church and in society. To that end, Sweeney notes two transformative effects of house-group ritualizing: “encourag[ing] each other” (that is, transformation of the women within the group) and “ministerial work” (that is, work that will affect those outside the group, including the wider community, society, or church). This two-part statement is common among descriptions of the effects of women’s ritualizing, as in this description of the work done by the feminist educational center WATER (the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual): “WATER plays an important role in the success of the women’s spirituality movement and in the renewal of church and society. We work locally, nationally, and internationally doing liturgies and programs, projects and publications, counseling and collaboration work. We help people to actualize feminist religious values and bring about social change” (Neu 27). This description weaves together individual transformation (women’s spirituality, liturgies, counseling, and identity performances shaped by feminist religious values) with “the renewal of church and society” and “social change.” Sweeney’s comment also aligns with the experience of another member of a women’s ritual
group. In describing how and when women’s unorthodox, communal celebrations of the Eucharist will influence the church as a whole, this ritualizer suggested:

“The first impact must be on the individuals in our group, and groups such as ours. As we begin to, or continue to, experience the power of the Spirit in ourselves, we cannot help but have a greater sense of respect for God-in-us, and God-in-each-other. This cannot help but flow out not only on the Church but on every aspect of our lives: work, relationships, government. It may take a long time, but this whole movement isn’t happening in a vacuum.” (qtd. in Dierks 270)

This woman’s experience of ritualizing mirrors the FutureChurch pilgrims’ experience: as they ritually performed their identities as priestly “signs” of Christ, integral (not marginal) to the proclamation of the gospel, they came to see “God-in-us” and “God-in-each-other.” As the pilgrims then live out their renewed gendered and spiritual identities, such transformation “cannot help but flow out” and affect “every aspect” of their lives, including the Church.

As they claim the right to ritualize (both in newly created ways and in the Eucharist), women who participate in house churches and ritual groups are both personally transformed and work toward the renewal of “every aspect” of their lives. In doing so, they are, as Driver would point out, performing “what could be,” creating transformation by physically embodying not what is now (women’s continued marginalization by the church hierarchy and tradition) but what will be: the ideal, future state of “radical gospel equality” and a renewed priestly ministry. Dolan quotes theatre scholar Bruce McConachie, who suggests: “‘No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life,’” but theatre – and, by extension, ritual – “‘can provide “what if” images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits.’ […] Those transforming moments are themselves
utopian performatives that imagine and embody the world in ‘what if’ rather than ‘as is’” (88).

Ritualizing is powerful because it allows women to “imagine and embody the world” as it might be, not as it is; doing so is the “imaginative work” that leads to transformation. At the end of her study, Dierks makes this very claim: “WomenEucharist” (her name for women’s communal, unorthodox celebration of the Eucharist) “is in itself an attempt at the future-in-present. What you have read so far is part of our practicing ourselves into tomorrow. [WomenEucharist] rehearses the what-will-be right now” (263).

Dierks’s word choice is revealing here: these women are engaging in embodied “practices” – spiritual “ways of being” – that allow them to “practice” for the future. Similarly, women’s ritualizing “rehearses” the ideal future. As with a theatre rehearsal, these rituals are moments of “listening again” for the ideal form that is nascent, hidden within the unpolished reality; they are chances to embody and give life to what is immanent; and they are ways of preparing for that future reality by making it more and more viable. “Elie Wiesel […] reminded us that when the unspeakable is spoken, it then becomes possible. […] W]e must speak words of hope in order to make hope possible” (Conn 27). Through such rituals, the pilgrims embody a vision for the future, a temporary realization of the vision to which they aspire. Their performances of a “radical gospel equality” are like “words of hope,” sustaining their struggle by allowing them to visualize – and work towards – a transformed future. Moreover, these performances are embodied “rehearsals,” not textual “table readings.” “Because it is performance,” as Driver puts it, “ritual produces its effects not simply in the minds but also in the bodies of its performers. When it is imbued with a spirit of liberty, ritual becomes part of the work through which a body politic (a people) throws off its chains” (190). As these women respond to a transformation of who they are, as effected by the rituals they have performed, they
often choose to continue to ritualize, so that their own identity performances and their churches and society are continually transformed, in a constant state of ritual “becoming.”

**Taking Action**

Following their first response, reclaiming ritual, these “dissident daughters”’ second main type of transformative response is to take more direct action. This action may be as simple (and yet radical) as storytelling: sharing their experiences and discoveries with their churches and with other Catholics. This possibility was made explicit at the end of the pilgrimage, at a debriefing session and dinner where the group “discuss[ed] next steps – if an how members of the tour want to disseminate what they learned about women’s leadership in early Christianity to their churches back home” (Patterson 13). In this way, transformation (of the future of these pilgrims, and of their churches) is integral to pilgrimage, its final step. Their transformation is effected as they engage in the practice of storytelling: a performance of challenge to the archive that has silenced these stories, a repertoiric performance of orality or “singing them back to life,” and a confessional performance through which the pilgrims may identify themselves as women who shape their identities in alternative ways, just as their stories’ subjects have done.

For other pilgrims, including Schenk herself, their ritually transformed identity performances demanded an even more active response: educating and petitioning Church leadership. This response also often comes in the form of telling the stories of their pilgrimage; of the discovered, ancient women leaders; and of other “women witnesses.” Storytelling – a repertoiric performance – can be used as a tactic to respond to the marginalizing silences of the archive. During her first pilgrimage, Schenk stated her goal: “‘We would just like to talk to our leaders and tell them of our experience, how we can begin to re-institute that wonderful balanced
leadership that we had in the first three centuries’” (qtd. in Poggioli). The pilgrims’ discoveries and experiences are so meaningful, Schenk suggests, that they have the power to transform the very structure of the Church. This “talking to our leaders” came, in part, in the form of a postcard campaign in which FutureChurch supporters asked U.S. bishops “to allow women to preach and proclaim the Gospel and to petition Rome to open the conversation about women deacons and priests” (“Rome Pilgrimage Honors”). Schenk’s transformative storytelling continued in 2008, when FutureChurch sent educational packets to the attendees of the U.S. bishops’ convention and asked those bishops to respond to the fact that many stories of women had been deleted from the lectionary. “Much to our delight,” Schenk said, “a bishop friend told me that a number of the bishops’ small groups had discussed the whole issue of women being deleted from the lectionary.” Most of these men “had no idea” that, for example, “Phoebe was cut right out of Paul’s letter”; remarkably, they responded by officially suggesting that the lectionary be reexamined and that work should be done to “consider how appropriate these readings are for present times.” By sharing her pilgrimage story and by insisting that women’s stories be told, Schenk turns to the power of the repertoire to address the lacunae of the archive.

In this second mode of response, taking action, the pilgrims move from Driver’s confessional mode into the ethical mode of performance.

In the ethical mode, performance aims to affect society directly, through actions that are political. What matters in the ethical mode is the world – its well-being, its fate, and the justice that is possible within it. In this mode, then, performance does not primarily mean showing but rather doing or accomplishing. Its aim is to get things done [...] Forging ahead, transforming what is now the case into what ought to be – this is the way of ethical performance; and since this cannot be done
secretly, an ethical act is performative in both senses of the word [...], as doing and also as showing. (120)

For most of FutureChurch’s pilgrims, I have had to speculate about their transformations, and those that are recorded are limited to the ritual mode (experiencing healing, or joining a house church or ritual group) or the confessional mode (identifying as bread-breakers or storytelling). In Schenk’s case, however, her transformations are somewhat more visible, in that she is the director of FutureChurch. Her recorded actions all seem to be responses to her pilgrimage and the transformations it effected in her. These actions are a matter of “affecting society directly” and working “to get things done” for reasons of justice. Not simply belief about these issues, they are a performance – a “doing” and “showing” of her transformation – in the ethical mode.

In the space between performance in the “ritual mode” and performance in the “confessional” and “ethical” modes, the pilgrims’ actions may also take the shape of what Jill Dolan calls a “utopian performative.” Both in attending a performance, as in Dolan’s example, and throughout a pilgrimage, “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (2). In this way, these performances are “‘arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities,’” in which participants “can be seen to be actively forming themselves as participating citizens of a perhaps more radical democracy” (11). In these “performative utopias,” as participants communally and ritually imagine “a better world,” they may begin to imagine, constitute, or confess their own identities as “citizens” of that ideal, future world. Furthermore, as Dolan notes, what is remarkable about this utopian moment is that it moves “away from the real into a kind of performative, in which
utterance, in this case, doesn’t necessarily make it so but inspires perhaps other more local ‘doings’ that sketch out the potential in those ritual imaginings and point to the future, to imaginative territories that map themselves over the real” (38). That is, such communal, ritualized imaginings of an ideal future – as in the case of FutureChurch’s ritualization of an egalitarian church structure and of women’s leadership – are transformative not only in the ritual moment but in a larger sense, in that they can lead naturally into Driver’s “ethical” mode of performance. As Dolan puts it, such utopian moments “might encourage them to be active in other public spheres, to participate in civic conversations that performance perhaps begins” (11).

Through the rituals of liturgy and pilgrimage, FutureChurch’s “journey of discovery” transformed women’s performances of identity by allowing them to discover their “spiritual ancestors” and by expanding the types of legitimate performances available to them. In response, these women took repertoric action: from embracing the right to ritual through house churches to telling their stories to Rome. The epigraph for Dissident Daughters is “Blessed are the dissident / the borderlands are theirs” (Berger v), and these pilgrims did indeed claim the “borderlands” – experiences, stories, histories, and rituals that are paradoxically both Catholic and unorthodox – as their own. In doing so, they discovered that “The world does look different from the edge than it does from the center”; like many pilgrims, they then “return home hoping to make their center a little more like the edge, believing that […] ‘The transformation of the world around us will be the result of personal transformation’” (Ozorak 78).

Through pilgrimage to the hidden history of Rome, these Catholic women sought out “alternative wisdom” in the form of “spiritual ancestors,” fragmentary traces of women who
seem to have been leaders in the first three centuries of the Christian church. They began by re-
seeing the archive, revealing it, as Diana Taylor suggests, as mediated, and engaging in a 
performance of challenge to the orthodoxy that its “changelessness” sustains. Encouraged by 
their discoveries of this suppressed history, they turned to the repertoire, celebrating rituals in 
which they embodied risky new interpretations of church tradition. Seeing themselves and each 
other as priestly signifiers of Christ, they broke bread in a ceremony that reinterpreted eucharistic 
tradition as egalitarian, Christ-commanded fellowship. In doing so, as Judith Butler would have 
it, their performances were not “true or false” but instead were acts that constituted knowledge, 
theology, and alternative identities. Importantly, the pilgrims constituted and performed these 
ideas and identities with their spiritual ancestors – Phoebe, Prisca, Theodora Episcopa, the Greek 
Chapel’s women celebrants, and others – by not only ritualizing memory of these women but 
actively re-membering these women and “singing them back to life,” as Nicola Denzey put it, 
through performance. These rituals transformed the pilgrims’ identity performances by 
expanding the range of “orthodox” performances available to Catholic women, legitimizing 
alternative performances by aligning them with the pilgrims’ spiritual ancestors, who themselves 
had performed their gendered and spiritual identities in alternative ways. It also allowed them to 
critically analyze Church orthodoxy and tradition, rejecting those practices that oppressed, 
erased, or marginalized women. Instead, they embraced rituals and theology that promotes 
healing and wholeness by allowing the pilgrims to see their identity performances as women 
leaders and as Catholics not as irreconcilable but as integrated, parts of a whole. Finally, they 
responded in active ways: by engaging in what Tom Driver calls “confessional” and “ethical” 
modes of performance and by reclaiming the repertoire – particularly ritualizing and storytelling 
– as a powerful tool through which to effect both personal and systemic transformation.
CHAPTER FIVE. CONTEXTUALIZING GODDESS PILGRIMAGE

“The past we conjure up is largely an artifact of the present”
– David Lowenthal, qtd. in Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 32

My focus in the next two chapters is on the pilgrimages and rituals of practitioners of the “Goddess movement,” a feminist-based spiritual movement that emerged some thirty to forty years ago and is an excellent example of the ways in which women’s spiritual practices (particularly pilgrimages) shape their performances of identity. Like the FutureChurch pilgrims, Goddess worshipers engage in “performances of challenge” by pointing to the gaps in the archive, then use pilgrimage and ritual – practices which belong in Diana Taylor’s “repertoire” – to imagine and perform their gendered and spiritual identities in alternative, non-orthodox ways. In contrast to those Catholic women, however, these pilgrims belong to a religion that has no “legitimate” archive, and thus cannot document its claims about its history, so their relationship to “the past” and performance of their “spiritual heritage” are quite different. Additionally, whereas those women who use pilgrimage and ritual to imagine alternative identity performances are a distinct subset of Roman Catholicism, they are the norm among Goddess worshipers; thus, general practices and two specific examples can be drawn from a much wider range of Goddess-seeking pilgrims than from Catholics. These practitioners use an eclectic variety of pilgrimages to, and rituals conducted at, sacred sites around the world as a way of connecting to the Goddess and the energies of the Earth. Even more so than Catholic women, they are dependent upon the embodied practices and oral tradition of the repertoire in order to create their sacred stories and perform identity in ways that are at odds with the authority of archaeological archive. As they do so, they re-inscribe the female body in positive ways, re-member and invent an ancient “spiritual
heritage” that grants legitimacy to their performances, and work to transform the future into a more egalitarian and Earth-honoring society. In analyzing these pilgrimage practices through the lenses of performance studies and ritual studies, I suggest that Goddess-focused pilgrimage can be seen as a rhetorical strategy of meaningful performance through which an emergent religion legitimizes its “history” and establishes a collective memory for its community.

After I began work on this project, I discovered a footnote in Kathryn Rountree’s essay “Goddess Pilgrims as Tourists”: “it could be argued that Goddess pilgrims are transgressing and rejecting patriarchal norms through their ‘inappropriate’ bodily performances at sacred sites” (489, n. 31). This, in a nutshell, is my argument in this chapter. These pilgrims’ performances of gendered and spiritual identity “transgress” those norms that benefit patriarchy by defining and limiting women and gender roles. However, while these women’s performances are “inappropriate” and highly unorthodox according to the patriarchal system and the norms of mainstream American society, the women themselves define “authority” differently, appealing not to archival authority but to the repertoire and an imagined “spiritual heritage.” In this way, I suggest, they illustrate Butler’s claim that “Genders can be neither true nor false” by revealing the ways in which their alternative performances are also legitimate (193). Moreover, as Butler puts it, “If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal” (7–8). As Goddess worship challenges “reifications of gender and identity” by re-imagining and re-defining “woman” (as a fluid, not stable, category of being), it might be said that its “political goal” is to recognize this “variable construction” as a normative, even “orthodox,” way of constituting one’s identity.
In this chapter, I again begin with an overview of the spiritual context of these pilgrimages. Following a primer on key terminology and a brief history of Goddess spirituality, I explore in more depth the movement’s relationship with its “spiritual heritage,” its concerns with re-defining notions of gender and femininity, and its politically minded intentions toward transforming individuals and society. I then turn toward a more focused study of its pilgrimages, their typical types and destinations, and the eclecticism that reflects the movement’s belief in holism. Finally, I consider them from a performance studies standpoint, exploring the ways in which these pilgrimages are characterized by the repertoire, not the archive.

Throughout this chapter, my purpose is not to critique Goddess spirituality, to determine which beliefs are historically accurate or theologically sound, or to analyze whether its pilgrimages are ritually effective (that is, whether they do, in fact, do what they say). Instead, my intention here is to draw upon a wide range of documents – ranging from scholarly analyses and both insider- and outsider-conducted ethnographic studies to first-person narratives, how-to guides, and descriptive travel brochures – and identify points of commonality and of difference. Because “Goddess spirituality” is an informal spiritual movement, not a doctrinal or organized religion, its beliefs and practices cannot be summed up in tidy fashion. Rather, as this chapter will reveal, it is an umbrella term used to encompass several different spiritual movements that have much in common, but which are themselves characterized by an eclectic variety of overlapping and contradicting beliefs and performative practices. Because many of these beliefs have direct bearing on the choices made by the movement’s pilgrims and the meanings ascribed to those choices, an understanding of this context must precede any close study of the two specific pilgrimages that are the focus of the next chapter.
As was the case in chapter three, my work here will be primarily descriptive, not critical, although I do seek to analyze these descriptions and suggest what they might mean in terms of performance. I am drawing upon information in which neither I nor most of my readers are experts; my purpose in writing has been to identify patterns of similarity and typicality that provide a “rough guide” to the movement as a whole. Moreover, I have sought to identify those beliefs and practices that seem most relevant to my particular study, and have limited my focus to those aspects that directly influence the religious and spiritual identity performances that are reflected in the particular pilgrimages I discuss in the next chapter.

Both pilgrimage and neo-Pagan religions such as Goddess Spirituality have seen exponential growth in academic writing and research in the past decade. However, although “[p]ilgrimage and paganism, in fact, are the most natural of allies,” very few writers have studied the two together (York 148). The significant exception, and only scholar writing extensively about Pagan pilgrimage, is Kathryn Rountree, an anthropologist who teaches social anthropology at Massey University in New Zealand. Throughout her work, Rountree focuses on feminist witchcraft in New Zealand and, more broadly, what she terms “Goddess pilgrims.” The other notable writer working in both pilgrimage and goddess spirituality is Carol P. Christ. The author of the essay “Why Women Need the Goddess,” Christ is a leading voice in the field of feminist theology; as the director of the Ariadne Institute in Greece, she also leads women’s pilgrimages. (Christ coined the term “thea-logy,” from the Greek word thea [goddess], to distinguish such study from theology, which she sees as the study of a male god, and many in the goddess movement therefore name their study of the Goddess “thealogy” [Rebirth xiv].) According to Rountree in 2002, “the contemporary Pagan pilgrimage has not been explored in any of the
(large and growing) sociological or anthropological literature on pilgrimage, tourism or modern Paganism”; I have found very few exceptions this statement (“Goddess Pilgrims” 477). This type of pilgrimage has also not been studied through the lens of performance studies. Indeed, as of 2006, “a discourse centered on the body” – and, thus, on the performing body – “is only just beginning to develop within the literature on the multivocal interpretation of sacred / historic sites and has yet to emerge in the literature on pilgrimage” (Rountree, “Performing” 98). There is, then, much to be done in this area.

DEFINING GODDESS WORSHIP

Pilgrims who seek out the Goddess are almost exclusively women, and primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom. There are “up to 500,000 in the American Goddess community and between 110,000 and 120,000 in the United Kingdom”; Pagan and Goddess communities are also spread throughout Canada, continental Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, South Africa, and Japan (Rountree, Embracing 6). Various terms are used to name this sub-group of Paganism. Kathryn Rountree uses “feminist witchcraft” and “Goddess spirituality” more or less interchangeably. In contrast, Chris Klassen and others see these two movements as distinct, or suggest that “Feminist Witchcraft is the meeting point between Wicca and Feminist Goddess Worship” (19). Others, such as Joanna Stuckey, call the movement “Feminist Goddess worship” (to distinguish it from other forms of feminist spirituality and from other, non-feminist forms of Goddess religions); it may also be labeled “Goddess worship,” “feminist spirituality,” “Goddess Feminism” (Vincett 139), or other similar names. While not precisely interchangeable, these terms are also not exclusive of each other; moreover, because they are self-assigned titles, not unified religious organizations, they do not carry clear-cut
definitions. Thus, for the purposes of this study, I will use the terms “Goddess spirituality,” “Goddess worship,” and “feminist spirituality” (and, when appropriate, “feminist witchcraft”) interchangeably to refer to the overarching belief systems and practices of this group.\(^1\) Although “feminist spirituality” is perhaps too broad a term (in that it is also used for movements such as Christian feminism, as seen in the previous chapters), I find it to be, when used in context, a useful umbrella term to encompass this wide variety of related beliefs and practices (including feminist witchcraft, Goddess spirituality, Neo-Pagan feminism, and the intersections between them), as do many of the authors I quote.

I refer to these practitioners as a whole as “the Goddess movement,” although titling it a “movement” may suggest a unity or uniformity that is not truly reflective of the wide array of practices and beliefs. I refer to the actions and rituals as “Goddess pilgrimage” and “Goddess worship,” and its practitioners as “Goddess pilgrims,” “Goddess Feminists,” or “Goddess worshipers,” despite the fact that “Goddess worship” may carry monotheistic, Judeo-Christian notions of worshipping a divine person; it will become clear from the following discussion that this is not the case. Nonetheless, these terms are useful because they distinguish goddess-centered practices from the more generic “feminist pilgrimage” or “women’s spirituality,” which might include all manner of practices based in feminist beliefs or conducted by women.

Goddess spirituality is a subset of contemporary Paganism, one of the “fastest growing spiritual orientations” in the world today (York 137).\(^2\) Paganism is “an umbrella term for a large

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1 This is not to suggest, however, that all feminists believe in a goddess, or that all spiritual feminists practice this sort of spirituality; for this reason, I avoid using the more general term “spiritual feminists.”

2 The terms Paganism (or Neo-Paganism) and Pagan are capitalized (here, and by most writers) because they are the name of an organized religious practice and its practitioners. However, “pagan” is left in lower case when it refers more generally to ancient, pre-Christian, or non-Christian peoples (such as those in England and Ireland who held to the “old ways”). “Pagan” (from paganus, “peasant”) was a descriptor applied to these people by others, usually Christian colonizers, and not a name that they themselves used for their religion.
number of modern Western Nature religions, the commonest being Wicca (modern Witchcraft),
Druidry, Neo-Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality and Heathenism” (Rountree, “Performing” 96).
Like other Pagan traditions, Goddess spirituality often claims Neolithic or Paleolithic roots, as
many within the movement seek to honor the goddesses and priestesses from pre-Christian
religions, or think of these women as their spiritual ancestors. Goddess spirituality, and
particularly the strain known as feminist witchcraft (which was formed in the United States in
the 1970s), also draws heavily upon – but is different from – modern Witchcraft, or Wicca, as
founded in England by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s.

Women may come to the movement from, or discover it through, Wicca, feminism,
Christianity, or other routes; indeed, almost all adult practitioners came to the practice by choice,
not by birth (although now, some thirty years after the movement’s beginning, this may begin to change). The first book to tell its “sacred story” was Elizabeth Gould Davis’s 1971 paperback
The First Sex, a “fanciful” description of “‘The Gynocratic World,’ the lost women-dominated
civilization of prehistory and early history”; another foundational text was Merlin Stone’s 1976
The Paradise Papers (Stuckey 130). Despite its obvious differences, goddess spirituality also
has ties to Christian feminism, and was strongly influenced by Mary Daly’s 1973 book Beyond
God the Father.3 Notably, these recent beginnings of the Goddess movement and the only
slightly older creation of Wicca are openly acknowledged by most of the religion’s adherents.

As with most Pagan subsets, Goddess spirituality espouses a love or respect for nature
and life (usually including Earth or “Gaia” as a living organism), a holistic interrelatedness of all
beings, and a creed, “Do what you will, but harm none,” based in both individual freedom and

3 Indeed, feminist witches and Christian feminists overlap to a surprising extent, and it is not uncommon for women
to identify as members of both groups. While many (including Daly and Carol P. Christ) came to goddess worship
when rejecting Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal, other Goddess feminists maintain ties to their churches.
personal responsibility (Rountree, “Performing” 96). The primary difference between feminist Goddess worship and other Pagan practices, such as Wicca, highlights an important value held by the former: most Wicca practitioners invoke an immanent divine reality represented by Goddess and God. In contrast, most feminist witches and goddess worshipers invoke only Goddess or goddesses: “a big one, bigger than the god of patriarchy” (Eller, Living 58).

Despite the label “Goddess worship” and the accompanying focus on “the Goddess,” this spiritual practice is not centered on religious worship of a female deity, and most practitioners do not worship the Goddess – certainly not in the way that Jews or Christians worship their God. Instead, although “the Goddess” is revered by many as a deity, manifested in the form of individual goddesses or as the Earth, she is even more important as a multifaceted symbol. As such, the Goddess “is given different meanings, including apparently contradictory ones, by different women. All meanings are considered valid and embraced within the holistic worldview of the movement” (Rountree, Embracing 51). For example, “the Goddess” may be understood as a symbol, a metaphor, a name encompassing many or all of the world’s goddesses, an image that celebrates women and their power, “the Sacred Feminine” or “the Feminine Divine” (Kidd 2), or “the symbol of the unity of all life in nature” (Castle xxxii). As Starhawk puts it: “I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, and we create her” (Starhawk 81). Cynthia Eller argues similarly:

Do spiritual feminists believe in one goddess or many goddesses? Both, they answer, both at the same time. Is their goddess within them, a part of them, or is

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4 Notably, Paganism is distinctly different from the “New Age” movement in many ways. Paganism and Wicca are also, contrary to some popular fears, indisputably not “Satanist” and are not to be equated with “Satan worship” (Satan is usually dismissed as a Judeo-Christian invention predated by Goddess religions).

5 I capitalize the proper noun “Goddess” when referring to “Goddess worship” or “the Goddess,” but use “goddess” to describe multiple or individual “goddesses”: “goddess figurines” or “the goddess Aphrodite.”
she completely outside of them, looking in? Both, they answer, both at the same
time. Does this goddess exist independently of human beings or did spiritual
feminists invent her? Both, they answer, both at the same time. (Living 132)

Such a belief system, unlike the systematic theology of religions such as Christianity, encourages
and emphasizes individual creativity and imagination, regarding what to believe (if anything, in
the dogmatic sense of “belief”) and how to practice or embody that belief; the richness and
variety of pilgrimages and rituals illustrates this individuality. Such statements also highlight
this spirituality’s unique relationship with “the past” and its non-reliance on archival “ways of
knowing.” Instead, as I will discuss later in the chapter, it sees repertoiric and ritual
performances as more effective ways of negotiating the paradox and ambiguity inherent in
multiple, simultaneously held beliefs about “the Goddess.”

An idea of “the Goddess” as both divinity and symbol, simultaneously, also highlights
the movement’s strongly held belief in holism, the interconnection of all things (a worldview
characteristic of Pagan practice). Based in what Castle calls “nondual awareness,” this spiritual
worldview is emphatically non-binary, even non-rational, in nature; it works outside of the
“orthodoxy” of Western logic to embrace all possibilities (xxxi). “Feminist witches reject a
world view founded on dualism […] in favor of a holistic world view which emphasizes
connection, balance and cyclic processes” (Rountree, “New Witch” 214). Thus, through their
ritual embodiments of belief (including pilgrimage), these women challenge the binary system
that undergirds the mainstream Western world view: that male / good / white / light / spirit /
culture are separate from, and superior to, their opposites, female / evil / black / dark / body /
nature. Instead, “several dualistic constructions dissolve and reveal themselves as continuities:
the human body and the earth’s body, the past and the present, inner and outer worlds, self and
other, human and deity” (Rountree, “Performing” 98–99). However, Goddess worshipers do not simply invert the binaries (for example, placing female above male) or suggest that the two are “separate but equal.” Instead, they reject the binary entirely, and see the two as connected, balanced parts of a whole, or “a new interactive unity” (Ruether, Goddesses 290). Once dualistic genders and have been rejected, traditional gender roles can be transgressed freely, and endless possibilities for gender roles and gender relations can be imagined, performed, and created.

CONSTITUTING ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Any religious or ritual practice that rejects of dominant, even orthodox, beliefs – such as Western ideas about rationalism, gender, and history – will undoubtedly face criticism. Indeed, the feminist spirituality movement has been criticized by many (including archaeologists and historians) for producing interpretations of the past that are “simply hopeful and idealistic creations reflecting the contemporary search for a social utopia” (Rountree, “Past” 5). Other critics, including feminists, charge the movement with essentializing “woman” by “reinforcing connections between women, nature, and nurturance,” and with “abandoning politics for mysticism” (Rountree, “Past” 5). In sum, this criticism holds that Goddess worshipers (1) ignore history to invent fantasies about the past, (2) essentialize “woman” as “fertility goddess,” and (3) are not political. While these accusations have undoubtedly been true in specific instances, I argue that they are not generally the case. In contrast, I suggest that these women consciously “re-see” history and claim such repertoiric mythologizing as a valid “way of knowing” about the past. They also reject universalizing definitions of “woman,” and constitute gender identity in multiple ways. Finally, their ritual performances are understood as strategies useful in working towards the “ethical mode” of performance, political transformation.
“Re-membering” Spiritual Heritage

First, criticism of the Goddess movement is often focused on what Cynthia Eller has dismissed as “the myth of matriarchal prehistory” – the “Golden Age” theories developed by writers such as Gerald Gardner and Marija Gimbutas. Although the religion’s “origins,” as Gardner published them in the 1950s, were widely accepted during the mid-twentieth century, they are now almost universally discounted as Gardner’s inventions. Other “glorious matriarchy” theories (such as those popularized by Gimbutas) suggest that the societies of “Old Europe” worshiped many forms of one “Great Goddess” and were therefore peaceful and egalitarian or matriarchal for thousands of years. Especially if critics’ understanding of goddess spirituality is limited to such theories, they may accuse goddess feminists of ignoring the archive.

However, contrary to the criticism that Goddess worshipers ignore historical evidence to invent fanciful theories, these women do adapt their beliefs about the past when new evidence is uncovered. For example, once strong archaeological evidence was presented to disprove some of Gimbutas’s conclusions, most Goddess feminists became critical of treating those idealistic theories as fact (although they may still hold dear to Gimbutas as an important spiritual pioneer). Instead, rather than insisting on a historical “matriarchy” (a society governed by a woman or women), many Goddess worshipers suggest that past societies might have been “matrifocal” or “matricentric” (with honor and authority granted to women), “matrilinear” (with the mother’s biological line determining family structure), or “partnership” (with both familial and social authority and value granted to women and men equally).

Moreover, “most women in the movement ‘are more concerned with the concept as a psychological and poetic formula than as an historical verity’” (Rountree, “Past” 9). Instead, as

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6 Eller’s (2000) book of that title, subtitled Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future, caused a terrific stir in the goddess movement because her first book had been written for and in support of the movement.
King suggests, quoting Starhawk, “historical details matter less than the ‘inner’ or ‘mythic’ history of the Goddess which provides the touchstone for modern witches: ‘Like the histories of all peoples, its truth is intuited in the meaning it gives to life, even though it may be recognized that scholars might dispute some facets of the story’” (130). The women who “intuit” the truth of this “mythic history” hold that it is enough to imagine alternative possibilities, and that the future can be re-shaped in line with an imagined vision of gender relations; it does not need to be a recreation of a past society. As a rule, they are open about deliberately and self-consciously mythologising the past, repeatedly quoting Monique Wittig’s advice: if you cannot remember, invent. Such invention is considered a justifiable means to achieve a future where women are (again) free and equal with men, the assumption apparently being that if you can visualize a better past, it should be easier to visualise, and more importantly to create, a better future. This is not the same as naively longing for “essentially de-evolutionary” cultural change. (Rountree, “Past” 6)

Instead of attempting to return to some idyllic, utopian past, many women believe that the past (the “historic” past, an imagined one, or some combination of the two) offers different models for gender roles and other relationships with and upon the earth. For most, the goal of imagining a Goddess-centered past is to place one’s spirituality and gender performance in line with millennia of others – to legitimize it by giving it a history or heritage – and then to imagine how that old-and-new performance of gendered and spiritual relationships can transform the future. Re-seeing the past is understood as a way to re-imagine and transform the future.7

7 In The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, Eller denies the need for an idyllic past. She suggests that this precedent “is not, as some feminist matriarchalists claim, required. [...] The future of women does not rest on biological destiny or historical precedent, but on moral choice. [...] If we are certain that we want to get rid of sexism, we do not need a mythical time of women’s past greatness to get on with the effort toward ending it” (186–87).
With this in mind, although they acknowledge the unprovable nature of such history, many (but not all) Goddess worshippers do hope that they are following in the tradition of such “matrifocal” or “matrilinear” societies, or imagine them as models for alternative structuring of contemporary gender relationships. To that end, they hold as sacred sites that are, or might be, connected with pre-patriarchal, pre-Christian, Goddess-centered, or earth-centered worship. At the same time, these women are now more concerned with changing the oppressive, patriarchal structures of current society than with reclaiming a utopian past.

Through studying history, journeying to sacred sites, and imaginatively re-membering what could have been, Goddess worshippers look to the past to find their spiritual history and heritage in religions and traditions that are freely acknowledged as (at least partially) mythologized and idealized. Therefore, two peculiarities emerge when considering Goddess worship’s relationship with history: the religion itself has very little by way of a history in the proper sense (unlike other religious traditions that can trace their origins back for many centuries), and the history it does look to for its “roots” is acknowledged as quasi-mythical (unlike other religions that emphasize what they claim as the factual history of their origins). For these reasons, their relation to the archive is unusual, and may include borrowing from or reclaiming other religious traditions’ archives or rejecting archaeologists’ “scientific” interpretations in favor of their own, more spiritually based, re-readings. They are also likely to value repertoiric performances as equally legitimate “ways of knowing” about the past.

Nonetheless, despite the mythical, unproven nature of this “history,” that “past” is deeply important to Goddess spirituality. Its practitioners recognize that, as a common quotation from Lowenthal puts it: “The past we conjure up is largely an artifact of the present,” and is always
unreachable (qtd. in Rountree, “Past” xvi). Thus, most women feel free to mythologize because they value “the past” not for its own inherent truth or value but as a way of imagining alternative social structures and possibilities for identity performance. Aligning those alternatives – usually highly “unorthodox” ones – with a history that these women claim as their “spiritual heritage” legitimizes those visions and possibilities. Through pilgrimage and ritual, goddess worshipers give bodily form to these visions, embody their ideas of what goddesses and their priestesses might have done, and bring that imagined “past” into the literal, physical present. Encouraged by a vision of the past they can now – through ritual – see as physically possible, they can now claim this vision as “legitimate” and work to make it a present and future reality.

Thus, an examination of feminist spirituality’s relationship with “history” suggests not that these women cling blindly to an idyllic fantasy of worldwide matriarchy and peaceful goddess worship, but that they look to what they know of the past and what they can imagine about it as a way of establishing a “spiritual heritage.” Furthermore, embodying these half-remembered, half-imagined pre-patriarchal societies and goddess priestesses or connecting to them through pilgrimage and ritual is important because it is a way of aligning their unorthodox spiritual practices, visions for the future, and performances of gender identity with “history” – however tenuous that connection might be – and therefore of claiming those practices and performances as newly orthodox and, perhaps more to the point, possible.

**Re-defining Gender Roles**

Goddess worshipers also face criticism for essentializing “woman.” I suspect that this is largely because many outside the movement think of “the Goddess” solely in terms of “the Great Mother,” “fertility goddesses,” a feminized version of the Judeo-Christian God, or “Mother
Earth.” This concern about essentialism is particularly important because of the beliefs in holism common among most Goddess worshippers; recognitions that “all things, including me, are part of the Goddess” would be dangerously essentializing indeed if the Goddess was imagined in exclusively or primarily maternal or even “feminine” terms. However, “the Goddess” of goddess worship is rarely thought of as a “fertility goddess”; instead, images of “the Goddess” challenge many traditional (and even “orthodox”) ideas about femininity and gender roles.

In stark contrast with the essentialized image of “the fertility goddess,” “there is total disagreement [within the movement] with the conventional view that the goddesses signify fertility only” (Rountree, “Past” 11). Indeed, very few Goddess worshippers think of the Goddess in these ways, instead ascribing many, vastly varied names and traits to goddesses or the Goddess, and suggesting that this “plethora of images – from warriors to nurturers, from saviors to destroyers” – is a far more useful model for women than any one image (particularly a fertility goddess) could ever be (Rountree, “Past” 11). This expands the range of “legitimate” possibilities for identity performance. Moreover, in whatever ways women constitute their identities when they perform as “goddess,” they are constituting new knowledge, not performing a “false” version of some “preexisting,” “real” gender identity (Butler 192). Thus, while many of feminist spirituality’s rituals and pilgrimages are concerned with menstruation, sexuality, fertility and infertility, birth and abortion, and menopause, it is not because these bodily functions define or are at the center of “woman,” but because they can be important to individual women, or occupy their attention from time to time, and are thus just as valid focuses for ritualizing as are other interests and values (such as ecology, peacemaking, or social justice).

This pattern is consistent with Rountree’s suggestion that “Goddess feminism’s reclaiming of the female body is in line with some recent feminist re-thinking of essentialism,
difference, feminine specificity, and the body” (Rountree, “Past” 6). For example, Christ “insists that biology matters. Men and women have different bodies, which give them different experiences […]. Goddess religion celebrates and valorizes the female body and its functions and thus restores beauty and dignity to that which has been devalued” (Ruether, Goddess 291). Whereas Christ celebrates the female body in its specificity, Grosz rejects patriarchal constructions of gender. She suggests that Goddess feminists choose “to reject all phallo-centric terms and values which have been employed to construct women, and ‘to represent woman and femininity otherwise […] in terms independent of men and masculinity’” (Rountree, “Past” 6).

One way to do this is to “represent woman and femininity” as “Goddess,” an image that not only encompasses a wide range of gender models but, more importantly, works outside of the male-female binary to represent all things. Because “the Goddess” “represents the whole of the human and natural world,” she is not simply a model of femininity (Rountree, Embracing 51). To imagine oneself as a representation of “the Goddess” is to imagine all possibilities for being.

Another way “to represent woman and femininity otherwise” is to re-imagine the terms through which women can represent themselves. As Irigaray asks,

How can we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal / deflowered, pure / impure, innocent / experienced … How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, alive, from their concepts? (212)

One way in which women may “free themselves” from the “chain of these terms” is through “the witch”; besides “the Goddess,” this is the other common symbol for defining or imagining oneself. For feminist spirituality, these two identities are not polar opposites, but parts of the
same; indeed, like all dualisms, “witch / goddess” is instead understood as an indivisible whole, interconnected “images of independent female power” (Rountree, “New Witch” 212). Thus, for some women, “the witch has become a potent symbol of woman as possessor of power and knowledge which is not sourced in nor controlled by patriarchal institutions, and is not dependent upon patriarchal legitimation or approval” (Rountree, “New Witch” 224). As a powerful woman who rejects the authority of, and is independent from, the societal “orthodoxy” of patriarchy, the witch is the epitome of unorthodox, even anti-orthodox, self-performance.

Therefore, suggesting that women can and should perform their identities as “goddesses” or “witches” is yet another way that feminist spirituality flies in the face (on its broomstick, so to speak) of patriarchal “orthodoxy.” “The Goddess” is in no way limited to traditional notions of femininity; just as “the mother” is but one part of her triad, so too is “fertility goddess” only one of her many faces. “The witch” claims a power and existence independent from patriarchy, and rejects altogether any need to be legitimized by masculine authority. Both of these images are “illegitimate models of ‘normal’ womanhood” that exist “outside the range of images acceptable or even imaginable for ‘normal’ women” (Rountree, “New Witch” 211–12). To the “orthodoxy” of patriarchy, they are heretical. Through a ritualized connection to an ancient spiritual heritage, however, they can be seen as (once again) “orthodox” in their own right, legitimized not by patriarchal society but through pilgrimage, sacred performance, and transformative ritual.

Feminist spirituality is deeply concerned with gender, but is by no means interested in worshiping or focusing on fertility. Instead, its practitioners seek, in various ways, to “reclaim the female body,” to re-define femininity “in terms independent of men and masculinity,” and to celebrate and affirm individual women’s individual bodies, experiences, values, gender identities, and beliefs about divinity and spirituality. By connecting to a goddess who performs
“the female” in myriad ways and who cannot be limited by gender roles, and by imagining themselves as “witches” and “goddesses,” images of female power independent of patriarchal social structure, goddess worshipers focus on re-imaging and re-defining gender. Specifically, as they use pilgrimage, symbol, and ritual to perform and claim these identities, the pilgrims I consider in the following chapter re-define gender roles by seeing themselves as representations of or parts of the Goddess, by celebrating female sexuality and power, and by performing and understanding physicality (including gender) and spirituality as part of a holistic unity.

Political Purposes

Finally, the third major criticism is that Goddess worshipers “have their heads in the clouds” or are only concerned with making themselves feel better – in short, that they are too busy navel-gazing to be politically effective. Such a charge is significant because of the movement’s close ties with the explicitly political feminist movement. Here again, however, my research suggests that the charge is, for the most part, false. My analysis of the previous two criticisms reveals an agenda with a strong political bent, one that is interested in re-imagining gender roles and gender relations, and performing femininity and the female body differently, so as to create a better, post-patriarchal future. Responding to the critique that because the movement is a spiritual one, it cannot be overtly interested in politics, these women insist that spiritual / political – like all other binaries – is a false dichotomy, and that the two parts cannot be separated but are part of a whole. They also respond to objections that this performance is not political because it cannot directly cause immediate social transformation by remembering that “the personal is political,” and that political change must begin at an individual level. That is,
Separate feminist spirituality is not only linked to a personal search for meaning and greater inwardness, but is often closely connected with the acceptance of social responsibility and political activism. [...] Some feminists see their new spirituality not only as important for themselves, but even more so for the construction of a new social order and the destruction of the old one. (King 116)

This aligns with Driver’s suggestion that the “ritual mode” of performance (here, “spiritual” ritual and pilgrimage) “gives rise to the confessional” (i.e., declaring one’s identity as a member of this community), which then “modulates into the ethical,” or politically efficacious, performance (113, 116). Although the first two modes can be transformative in their own right, they are also important in that they are “closely linked,” as King points out, to political action. Thus, this spiritual practice works towards political and social transformation.

Goddess worshipers’ goals are both directly and indirectly political. In practice, many Goddess worshipers are actively involved in political activity (from Greenpeace to rape crisis centers), and their “spirituality seems to underpin rather than undermine their political activity, and is far from being a cop-out from political work” (Rountree, “Lion” 163). Moreover, many of them define their rituals “as magical. Their magic lies in their ability to effect transformation” by changing their own consciousness; because they believe that “everything in the universe is interconnected,” these women hold that “this alteration of the practitioner’s consciousness can, and does, change the world” (Stuckey 139). For them, working towards self-transformation, often through ritual, is the necessary first step toward changing society.

Whether or not individual Goddess pilgrims think of their activity as political (and certainly many of them do), I suggest that the movement as a whole is imbued with two feminist

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8 The environmental and political work carried out by many leaders in the Goddess community, including Starhawk and Christ, is well documented, and others in the movement see it as a model to follow. However, because Goddess worshipers often engage in activism as individuals, it is difficult to trace the activism of the movement as a whole.
values that are quite political (and are at the heart of this study): re-imagining what performances of gender identity fit within or constitute “femininity” and “the female,” and seeking to transform gender identity and gender roles in the future.

Although Goddess spirituality and pilgrimage is dismissed by some as a narcissistic endeavor that ignores all historical evidence, invents and clings desperately to a fantastical history, essentializes “woman” as fertility goddess, and has abandoned politics, these claims bear little resemblance to reality. Instead, without rejecting what little historical evidence there is about ancient societies, these women re-read the archive to point out the “gaps” in that history, challenge its authority, and imaginatively use repertoiric performance to fill them in with “what could have been.” Through pilgrimage, they connect to what they see as their “spiritual heritage,” and re-membering this “history” through performance establishes its authority to make their rituals transformative. Similarly, they performatively constitute their gendered identity in new ways, by embodying the myriad faces of the Goddess and reclaiming these unorthodox performances of femininity as part of their “heritage.” By remembering and even inventing “the past”; pilgrimaging to sites sacred to that “spiritual heritage”; and re-imaginging gender roles through performance, Goddess worshipers reveal their political intent and the “ethical mode” of their performance. Dissatisfied with a social structure that, as they see it, not only is patriarchal but sees that patriarchy as “natural” or what “always has been,” these women re-image the past to see it differently. If a “pre-patriarchal” past can be imagined, then a “post-patriarchal” future can be created; similarly, if models not invented by or based in patriarchy can be found for women, then femininity and gender can be re-imagined as well. In these ways, Goddess worshipers work to transform the future through imagination, symbol, pilgrimage, and ritual.
With this in mind, I suggest that Goddess spirituality has three important goals, which I will develop more fully in the next chapter. First, it works to transform individual identity: the ways in which women can imagine, name, constitute, or perform themselves. Such “identity” can be shaped in many ways, but is particularly marked by women’s spirituality and their beliefs about gender roles and “appropriate” manifestations of femininity. Through the practice of Goddess spirituality, individual identity can be re-imagined in many ways: by connecting to, or seeing oneself as, “the Goddess”; by re-claiming, re-defining, and naming oneself as “goddess” or “witch”; by performing rituals that both celebrate and re-imagine gender and femininity; and by embracing a holistic worldview that reveres “the Goddess” as a manifestation of “all that there is,” unlimited by human-made, binary divisions such as divine / human and male / female. In these ways, Goddess pilgrims expand the range of identity roles and performances, both spiritual and gendered, that can be understood as possible, acceptable, and “orthodox.”

Second, Goddess spirituality seeks to establish, “remember” (or invent), and connect to – through repertoiric performance – the historical cultures that it sees as its “spiritual heritage.” Ancient goddesses and spiritual ancestors serve as models for contemporary pilgrims’ alternative identities; because such models are held sacred, they also legitimize these women’s identity performances as orthodox and equally legitimate, not aberrations from the norm. For many Goddess feminists, re-reading the archive and imagining alternative ways of interpreting the historical past also suggests that other social structures may be viable alternatives to patriarchy.

Finally, this spiritual practice works in the “ethical mode” to transform society at large, particularly patriarchy. In many ways, the first goal cannot be separated from this one, as “healing the wounds of patriarchy” on an individual level is seen as a necessary first step before greater transformation can take place. That is, before women can imagine and work towards a
society not based in patriarchy and traditional notions of gender, they must first use the “ritual mode” of performance to re-imagine what their own gender means and how it can be performed (or performed differently). At the same time, Goddess spirituality seeks to bring into question (even if it cannot disprove) beliefs that human society has “always been” patriarchal, or that the superiority of males over females is inherent or “natural.” Feminist spirituality re-imagines human history in ways that suggest that male superiority is not “natural,” or that respect for women or living in peace with the Earth are possible. Doing so through ritual and pilgrimage – and then living out performances of identity that suggest such possibilities – may be an important step towards a transformed future.

GODDESS PILGRIMAGES

One of the most important strategies feminist spirituality uses to achieve these three goals is pilgrimage. As Stuckey notes, “Feminist Goddess Worshippers employ ritual as a tool. In fact, their spirituality manifests itself primarily in ritual,” including the ritual of pilgrimage itself as well as the rituals performed during such a journey (137). Throughout this study, pilgrimage is being defined as a faith-based journey to, and performance at, a sacred site that encourages some sort of transformative connection with a divine spirit or supernatural force.

Pilgrimage has been defined as travel “with the purpose in whole or part of visiting, seeing, or touching a physical place or thing that is in some manner associated with ultimate or nearly ultimate concerns” – that is, with what is “sacred” (Blasi 159, italics added). The “sacredness” of the pilgrimage site is as important for Goddess pilgrims as it is for any other type of pilgrim, despite the fact that this spiritual practice has little authoritative “history.” Few, if any, goddess pilgrimages are to sites established by the founder or an early disciple; neither are
there many pilgrimages to sacred birthplaces or to sites where apparitions have been seen.

Nonetheless, Goddess pilgrims still emphasize that pilgrimage is “a sacred journey to a sacred place with a sacred purpose” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 482, italics added). One Goddess feminist put the question thus: “There are key areas scattered around the planet that we recognize to be sacred space. What is it that makes these places so special?” (Devereux 3). The most important answer is that sacred sites allow pilgrims “to enter into the most direct possible contact with the divine and the sacred, and to create with it a relationship the meanings of which may be multiple but are not necessarily exclusive” (Voyé 115–16). Above all, “sacredness” is found where pilgrims perceive and perform a personal, transformative contact with the divine.

Sites may be “sacred” to Goddess pilgrims for at least four different, overlapping reasons. What Turner and Turner might call “prototypical” sites are sacred because they are known or believed to have been created to honor a goddess. The Temples of Diana and Athena in Italy and Temples of Hagar Qim and Mnajdra on Malta are primary examples. In that they suggest that goddess worship is an ancient practice and was once commonplace in many parts of the world, pilgrimages to these sites “dramatically manifest […] the orthodoxy of the faith from which they have sprung” (Turner and Turner 18). These are common destinations for group pilgrimages.

Other sites may be considered “sacred” because they are believed to be related to long-ago goddess or earth-based worship. Stone circles and ancient wells exemplify this type of site. Also included are what Turner and Turner term “archaic pilgrimages”: those sites that, although associated with a major or orthodox religion, “bear quite evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs” (18). There are countless sites scattered throughout Europe where cathedrals and holy wells were placed at important sites of pre-Christian worship (such as Glastonbury in England, St. Brigid’s Well in Ireland, and St. Non’s Well in Wales). Thus, it is not uncommon
for Goddess pilgrims to visit sites that are, according to the dominant narrative, Christian, and challenge that narrative in order to reveal the much older “orthodoxy” buried beneath.

Glastonbury introduces a third type of sacred site, in that the cathedral was built on Glastonbury Tor (“tor” meaning “hill”), a geological formation long believed to represent “the Goddess’s body.” Castle describes seeking out such places as “the original altar, the body of the Goddess, in the form of a cave, mountain, spring, or tree – places of connection between the worlds” (xxxi). For example, Jill Smith writes of her experience at The Sleeping Beauty Mountain in Scotland: “The mountain becomes truly sacred in her manifestation of the changing aspect of Goddess” (27). These sites are sacred because they represent the physical presence of the Goddess, or give the pilgrim a sense of being enveloped in the Goddess’s body.

Fourth, sites may be “sacred” where they allow a passage between worlds. For example, the Delphi Temples are a site of oracular dreaming (Devereux 6), while “St. Non’s Well has trance-inducing powers” (Sjöö 34). Many sacred sites are energetic because of “magnetic underground water currents,” amplified by stones “placed above streams that cross each other” (Sjöö 45). These are “locations where the sacred power of ‘Gaia’ […] is manifest and can be accessed” (Reader 213), or where “the veil between this world and the other is the thinnest – […] a place of inspiration, revelation, and encounter with the divine” (York 143). For example, one pilgrim describes “journeying to the sacred places of the Earth, to places where there is a sense of a special energy, which is sometimes felt as a profound stillness, and sometimes felt as increased energy and heightened perception. It is on these pilgrimages to sacred places that I began to learn to listen more consciously” (Williams 168). Such “listening” is understood as a means of transformation. Thus, as with other sites where pilgrims seek out healing, these pilgrimage sites are places where one might be touched by – and transformed by – the Goddess.
These four reasons are not as distinct as they seem, and often overlap: both “prototypical” sites (such as Malta’s temples) and geological sites (such as holy wells) are often also good sites for dreaming, and may represent the Goddess’s body as well. All of these types of sites “serve as transformational gateways, giving insight and healing, charging us with the creative power of the earth itself, and receiving our sorrow, pain […]”. Here we can explore the sacred dimensions of relationship between the Earth and ourselves as we enter into the consciousness of a site. We may then be taught by the site itself” (Castle xxxii). For these pilgrims, sacred sites can be places of healing, of discovery or learning, and of connecting to divine, creative powers or ancient deities. Moreover, “the perceived connection between the site and pre-Christian deities or religion makes it a holy place” (Rountree, “Performing” 101, italics added). Thus, particularly because none of these “origins of sacredness” can be proved in any scientific way, this “perceived connection” is perhaps the truest mark of a sacred site.

In sum, I characterize Goddess pilgrimage as a ritual comprised of travel to and performance at a sacred location – thus, one in which, through and central to the embodied performance of the participant, the remembered or imagined sacred history and power of a place is embodied in a way that transforms the pilgrim.

TWO KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF GODDESS PILGRIMAGE

Characterized by Eclecticism

Because of Goddess spirituality’s unique relationship with history and its strong belief in holism, one of the most remarkable characteristics of Goddess pilgrimage is relative its lack of

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9 Certainly, having unprovable or idealistic ideas about a pilgrimage site is not unique to Goddess worshipers, as is made clear by Tomasi’s definition of pilgrimage (in general) as “an individual, but more frequently collective, journey toward an ‘elsewhere’ sometimes more desired than known, and which in certain respects may assume utopian features in the imaginations of those about to undertake it” (3, italics added).
distinguishing features; it is remarkably eclectic in nature. Because Goddess spirituality lacks a specific or longstanding religious history, and because its adherents have a holistic understanding of “the Goddess,” many Goddess worshipers recognize all sites that are believed to be related to goddess or Earth-based worship as part of their ancient spiritual heritage. Thus, “In terms of their spiritual or religious identity,” this movement’s followers “belong to an ‘imagined community,’ free of temporal or territorial constraints, comprising an eclectic assemblage of past and present ‘Goddess-worshipping’ peoples” (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 31–32).

Among the most popular sites are those related to prehistoric Goddess worship (such as Çatalhöyük and Malta), Greek goddesses (including Delphi and Knossos), and Celtic traditions (including Stonehenge, Glastonbury, and Brigid’s Well). Some women seek out the spiritual traditions of their homeland or ethnic ancestors (thus Anglo-American women’s interest in Celtic sites); others gravitate towards the goddesses with which they are most familiar (for many women, the Greek goddesses); still others seek to discover as many Goddess traditions as possible (at sites in Europe, North and South America, Australia, Asia, India, and Africa). The pilgrim’s destinations are chosen because they are personally meaningful, as part of her sacred “heritage” or connected to her “imagined community” of fellow pilgrims and spiritual ancestors.

The activities that make up Goddess pilgrimage are as varied as the sites. Pilgrims, mostly women, travel to these sacred places individually or in groups. Some travel by foot or local transit, while many others take advantage of guided tours. Whether conducted individually or with a group, such pilgrimages may include visits to “ancient temples and monuments, stone circles, churches, tombs, sacred wells, caves, mountains and other natural features,” as well as ritual, meditation, lectures, museum visits, interaction with local people, and “regular” tourism (Rountree, “Performing” 95). For example, one of the best well-known tours is led by Goddess
worship’s leading theologian, Carol Christ. Christ’s Ariadne Institute promises all of these experiences during its “Goddess Pilgrimage” tour of Crete:

Feel Her power in holy mountains, sense Her mysteries in the darkness of caves, pour out libations of milk and honey on Minoan altars. Contact a sacred energy that will transform the way you feel about women, yourself. Walk on the stones of the ancient sites […]. Discover the matrifocal subtext of Christianity […].

Nourish your soul in the museums […]. Hike in the mountains […]. Stay in small villages, meet local people, dance to Cretan music, feast on freshly cooked fish, tsatsiki, taramosalata, feta cheese, tiny olives, fried potatoes, local wine...

The repertoiric performances of rituals, sensory experiences, and connection to both ancient and contemporary “local people” are all typical to such pilgrimages. As Christ’s above description illustrates, goddess pilgrims’ “ways of knowing” are frequently bodily actions – that is, verbs.

Other tours emphasize “a mythical sacred landscape,” perhaps including “ancient trees, standing stones and holy wells” (Ireland), or a more direct link between such “sacred landscape” and personal spirituality. For example, “Goddess Tours to Malta” offers

an opportunity to get in touch with both the sacred places without and the sacred spaces within. Peaceful, personal time at the temple sites helps to forge the link between past and present, connecting us to the joy of celebrating life, so abundant in the art and architecture of the 3rd and 4th Millennium BCE. (“Spirituality”)

For all their variety, a typical pattern emerges: pilgrims will visit several sacred sites within a region, spend time in individual meditation at or exploration of each site, celebrate a ritual at one or more sites, and learn about the area’s culture and history from museums, guides, and locals.
Such variety is in keeping with Rountree’s suggestion that the Goddess pilgrim is rather postmodern in her practice, “collecting a plethora of deities, myths, rituals and sacred sites from the world’s religious traditions.” Nonetheless, she importantly emphasizes, “The devotees of Goddess spirituality may readily admit that their modern Paganism involves much borrowing and pastiche, but they are deeply serious about their belief in the sacred energy connected with ancient Pagan temple sites, and equally serious about their experiences of this energy” (“Goddess Pilgrims” 478–79). As pilgrims seek out the “sacred energy” of those sites that are most personally meaningful, they connect to these sites in intimate, individual ways. In the next chapter, the pilgrimages I examine involve such varied activities as rituals, museum study and guided tours, conversation with locals, dreaming, storytelling, meditation, and time spent experiencing the region’s culture and sacred history. For these pilgrims, all of these activities are valid and important because they can serve as transformative rituals, ways of connecting with the goddess and with their spiritual heritage, and of “becoming” themselves anew.

**Characterized by Repertoire, Not Archive**

The other remarkable characteristic of Goddess spirituality is its reliance on “the repertoire,” and its overwhelming lack of “archive.” Because the “history” that it claims as “spiritual heritage” is fragmentary at best, and is pieced together from many cultures (including prehistoric ones), the Goddess movement has very little by way of written history. It has no “bible” or sacred text, no dogma, and not much of a creed. Although it holds many historical

10 Goddess pilgrims respond to charges of appropriation in various ways: some limit themselves to their ancestry’s traditions; others (including Starhawk) insist that with such “borrowing” comes responsibility, and therefore work to preserve the heritage of the “source” cultures. Most, however, emphasize that all cultures’ traditions reflect important but widely varied aspects of the Goddess, and feel that limiting the cultural sources of their Goddess imagery limits their understanding of the Goddess. (This is not the same as suggesting that all cultures’ versions of the Goddess are simply representations of one universal divinity, an idea that is usually rejected as monotheistic.)
sites as sacred, most of those sites are regarded by outsiders as “heritage sites,” “historical monuments,” or Christian sites; similarly, scant archeological evidence is universally believed to reflect the history of Goddess worship. Even now, contemporary Goddess spirituality has little by way of “records.” Although many use common forms or similar elements in their rituals, there is no set “order of service” or established form, and most rituals and pilgrimages are not recorded or documented, either from a lack of trust in written authority or a desire to keep from cementing or stagnating these practices or discouraging imagination and invention. Thus, “[t]he sacred history of Feminist Goddess Worship does not constitute dogma or scripture. Though it often gets written down, it is primarily an oral history, made new by every woman who interprets it and adds to it as she tells it” (Stuckey 128–29). As an oral tradition, Goddess spirituality neither has nor relies upon “the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)” – and what archive there is, as seen in the next chapter, is understood as ambiguous and open to interpretation (Taylor 19).

Instead, this religion depends upon performance and bodily knowing for the knowledge and transmission of its history, traditions, and practices. Such “flesh-and-blood performance” makes up “the repertoire,” which “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 20). This knowledge is re-membered or transmitted through pilgrimage, individual and group ritual, intuitive practices such as dreaming, bodily performance of identity, oral traditions and myths, chants and songs, and imagined or felt connections with the Goddess, ancient priestesses, and the performance traditions of long-forgotten women. Knowledge is passed from one person to another, and even from the past to the present (through imagination and felt connection). For Goddess worshipers, such
performance “functions as an episteme, a way of knowing” (Taylor xvi). As a young religion without a sacred text and without an archival connection to its claimed roots, Goddess spirituality depends upon the performance of repertoire as a means of transmitting worship practices, rituals, collective memory, and the ability to re-imagine and to change society.

Thus, through performance, such as pilgrimage, Goddess spirituality “transmits memories, makes political claims, and manifests a group’s sense of identity” – despite a lack of archival “history” (Taylor xvii, italics added). Such a claim may seem radical or impossible: how can performance transmit “memories” of a non-existent past? This apparent conundrum is based, however, in “colonial notions that the archival and biological [or ‘scientific’] are more lasting or accurate than embodied performance practice” (173). This is exactly the limitation faced by Goddess spirituality: it is denied interpretive claim over the archaeological evidence, and its traditions of “embodied performative practice” are not taken seriously when they diverge from historical or archaeological “evidence.” Further, as Taylor suggests, “the political implications” of the repertoire are clear: “If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity” (xvii). The “social memory” transmitted through rituals such as Goddess pilgrimage is, according to many pilgrims, the memory of societies that were decidedly not “powerful” and that left no written records. Instead, it is the memory of the silenced and erased: women, “pagans,” and those societies conquered and obliterated by patriarchal society. Therefore, their performances are valuable transmitters of memory – perhaps even if that memory is inaccurate – because they “make visible those social actors, scenarios, and power relations that have been overlooked and disappeared over and over again” (278). Goddess worship makes visible the holes in the archive, the documents and artifacts that have not endured, and suggests alternative ways of remembering the past.
Much of what is “remembered” is mythic: rituals and oral legends that explain the origins and practices of Goddess worship, both ancient and contemporary – the collective memory of the religion. This is a typical pattern because “‘[t]he principal domain in which the collective memory of peoples without writing crystallizes is that which provides an apparently historical foundation for the existence of ethnic groups or families, that is, myths of origin.’ … Writing provides historical consciousness and orality provides mythic consciousness” (Taylor 21).

Goddess spirituality is, in many respects, “a people without writing,” without written history, sacred text, or extensive documentation. Like other religions, it uses ritual and sacred sites to create “myths of origin” and “families” of spiritual ancestors. However, because those ideas are passed predominantly through orality or ritual, they make up “mythic consciousness,” in telling contrast with “historical” (or archival, authoritative, orthodox) ways of knowing.

Moreover, instead of being limited by this lacuna of “archive,” such practice subverts the supposed authority of the archive to celebrate the practices of the repertoire. If the authority granted to patriarchy, history, and reason – that is, the archive – is the reason why some voices from the past are not remembered (whether because patriarchy destroyed them outright or simply did not value their memory), then the archive’s “authority” is challenged as an inadequate way to interpret that past. Instead, knowledge passed through the repertoire allows pilgrims to imagine other interpretations of the past; through the repertoire, they can perform those alternative visions as a challenge to patriarchy’s authority to define the “orthodox” meaning of the past (and thereby limit what memories and identities are legitimate or acceptable). Alternative “ways of knowing” then allow the pilgrims to embody those long-forgotten, re-embodied memories and identities and re-define them as (once again) legitimate models for the present and the future.
In particular, the pilgrimages in the following chapter rely upon a non-archival sacred heritage because the sites they choose are either without a recorded history or are differently interpreted by the authoritative archaeologists. In both cases, the pilgrims’ performances transmit the memory of silenced, erased peoples and enact the “embodied memory” of their spiritual heritage. In doing so, they constitute their performed “sense of identity” as a legitimate part of the Goddess worshiping movement’s spiritual heritage.

As a movement, Goddess worshipers expand gender roles and redefine “femininity” by seeking out alternative models, often in the many forms of the Goddess and in ancient and prehistoric societies, then constituting their own identities through the performative act of re-embodying those models. Although these “memories” about the past lack any solid archival evidence and are largely inventions of the present, they are important parts of these women’s spiritual heritage and imagined community. As “heritage,” they not only offer models for alternative identity performances; they also legitimize these performances as sacred. As they re-imagine the past and perform their connection to it through the performance tools of the repertoire, Goddess worshipers also work to transform the future. To do so, they often use pilgrimage.
CHAPTER SIX. PILGRIMAGE IN SEARCH OF THE GODDESS

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that.
You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied.
You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. […]
You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist.

But remember. Make an effort to remember.

Or, failing that, invent.

– Wittig 89

To explore how Goddess pilgrimage’s performances, goals, and transformations work in practice, and not simply in theory, I examine two examples in particular. These pilgrimages are narrated in chapters in Leila Castle’s edited volume *Earthwalking Sky Dancers: Women’s Pilgrimages to Sacred Places*. Castle suggests that these narratives are stories of remembering, of listening to the earth, of each woman learning to reconnect with her wisdom nature and the wisdom of the Earth. They are the stories of contemporary priestesses of Gaia. Each chapter reveals different ways each woman has learned and been taught to reclaim her sacredness and the sacredness of the Earth through her pilgrimage to, and relationship with, sacred places. These experiences communicate patterns of similar themes and symbols that transcend time and connect us with the ancient knowledge of prepatriarchal Goddess cultures from sites all over the world today. (xxxi)

This introduction highlights three useful ideas about pilgrimage that are woven throughout this chapter. First, it suggests that repertoiric performance (remembering, listening, and going on
pilgrimage) transmit an “ancient knowledge.” Furthermore, it claims that women’s
embodiments of these performance practices constitute their identities as “priestesses” of the
Goddess. Third, it claims pilgrimage’s transformative power: through “pilgrimage to, and
relationship with, sacred places,” women discover themselves to be sacred as well.

In her preface to the book, Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*, describes
the pilgrimage narratives’ importance in this way: they “empower us in this struggle [to create a
more partnership-oriented world]. They inspire us, as we read of the courage of women […] to
explore new spiritual paths […]. Above all, they open for us new possibilities, not only for
ourselves, but for our world” (xii). The following narratives do just that: reveal how those
pilgrimages were “new spiritual paths” that opened the pilgrims to “new possibilities” in their
performances of gender and of spirituality.

*Earthwalking Sky Dancers*, published in 1996, contains eighteen women’s first-person
narratives describing pilgrimages to the Goddess or the Earth. Some are as short as four pages or
as long as twenty-eight, but almost all are within eight to twelve pages. One work is fiction,
looking back to the mythical past and singing lost songs “back to life.” All the rest are first-
person narratives describing personal experiences, including individual pilgrimages, visits to
multiple sacred sites, and life patterns developed by moving to and living in places that represent
“the body of the Goddess.” These sacred sites are spread across Europe and the Mediterranean;
the Pacific, Asia, and Africa; and North, Central, and South America.

The book is edited by Leila Castle, who “has studied and taught Goddess traditions for
over 25 years, and made journeys to sacred sites since 1975” (Castle 218). In particular, she
studies and teaches geomancy, or “earth divination – knowing the language of the Earth,” and is
former co-director of *Spotted Fawn Geomantic Arts* (xxix). Castle frames the collection by
introducing this sort of divination and intuition, and describes her own dreams, pilgrimages, and other transformative experiences. However, the work as a whole is not a study of geomancy *per se*, but of what Castle celebrates as “the wisdom teachings of the Great Mother through her sacred places” (xxxv). These sacred sites tie the book together, and many of the narratives share the themes of dreaming, initiation, “coming home,” and learning from or connecting to the sites.

Castle celebrated this book as important because there is “not a collection of stories such as these that express a uniquely female view of our experience of the sacred feminine in relationship to sacred sites around the world” (xiii). This statement highlights the book’s three most important threads: personal experience (not scholarly study), the experiences of women, and sacred sites that are connected to the Goddess or “the sacred feminine.” Castle’s reason for gathering these stories is similar to my reason for selecting this work: although some women describe their pilgrimages in magazine stories or on the internet, this is the only collection I found that seemed an apt resource for my study of women’s performances at such sacred sites.

From this book, I have selected two texts in particular: “Red Eggs and Black Olives: A Daughter’s Initiation in Crete” by Tsultrim Allione and “Dancing with Gaia and Seeking an Oracle” by Jo Carson. Because the practices of Goddess spirituality are so eclectic, I find it more appropriate to study two different narratives instead of allowing one to stand in for the movement as a whole. These two narratives in particular seemed most useful because they each focus, at least in part, on one specific journey (as opposed to a series of experiences), and are thus easily readable as pilgrimages. In addition, both of these describe pilgrimages to European destinations, and so align with the contextual literature I studied in the previous chapter.

As I describe these two women’s pilgrimages, as with the previous chapters, my intent is not to determine the validity of their beliefs or the efficacy of their rituals. The way that Allione
and Carson describe their experiences is part of their performances of identity, so I have chosen to work with these performances as narrated, and not seek to challenge their veracity. Instead, I am interested in how these performances of identity function as performances. Specifically, I consider the ways in which these women connect to a felt or imagined past and ritually embody the Goddess, and what those embodiments reveal in terms of gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Following a description and analysis of each of these two pilgrimages, I spend the second half of the chapter teasing out three purposes of pilgrimage that they illustrate: to re-inscribe the female body or to constitute femininity in new ways so as to effect personal healing, to use the tools of the repertoire to “remember” a quasi-mythical sacred heritage, and to work through these two tactics toward wider social transformation in Driver’s “ethical mode” of performance.

RE-IMAGINING GENDER: PILGRIMAGE TO CRETE

In “Red Eggs and Black Olives: A Daughter’s Initiation in Crete,” Tsultrim Allione describes the initiation ritual she performed with her daughter. Allione was ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun in 1970. After returning her vows four years later, she married and eventually moved to Colorado to continue her Tibetan Buddhist practice as a mediation instructor; she is now recognized as a lama (Tibetan Buddhist teacher). She is best known as the author of Women of Wisdom (1984), a study of six Tibetan Buddhist yoginis, and recently published Feeding Your Demons (2008). As the founder of Tara Mandala Retreat Center in Colorado, Allione leads pilgrimages and retreats to sacred sites worldwide (Castle 217).

The essay “Red Eggs and Black Olives” is nine pages long, plus a photograph of Aloka in the stone circle. The trip seems to have lasted about eight to ten days, and was taken around 1991; thus, Allione wrote this narrative sometime within the five years after the journey.
During Greek Easter of the year Allione was forty-three and her daughter Aloka was fifteen, the women made a pilgrimage to Crete, a place that had become important to Allione “as part of a personal journey in search of the sacred feminine” (13). On their way, they stayed in Athens with theologian Carol P. Christ. The women discussed “a rite of initiation into the mysteries of Aphrodite that [Christ] had created for the daughter of a friend” (13–14). Inspired by this story, Aloka asked her mother if she would create a ceremony for her that would mark Aloka’s transition into womanhood. Allione agreed, “knowing how important it is for ritual to mark the stages of life” (14). With that belief in mind, although without any specific plans, she began to gather items that might be useful for Aloka’s initiation ritual. This ritual, and the pilgrimage that surrounded and contextualized it, were characterized by four distinctive elements: a focus on gender roles, authority gained through connection to the past, an interweaving of spirituality and sexuality, and an exchange of gifts.

**Constituting Alternate Gender Roles**

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Allione and Aloka’s pilgrimage was the emphasis on alternative performances of gender. Although Aloka’s ritual was focused specifically on her personal performance of gender, Allione’s description of the entire pilgrimage is infused with ideas about gender. Near the beginning of her essay, Allione writes: “We were transported into the peaceful Neolithic culture, imagining moonlight ceremonies occurring around these beautiful marble goddesses. The idea of temples containing beautiful female imagery was healing for us, mother and maiden seeing resonance and reflection for our spiritual and physical lives” (14). Already, her performance of her gender identity is significant in that she connects her own femininity to the “female imagery” of goddess images and traditions; she further connects her
self-identity to that of the goddess by identifying herself within the “mother” phase, and not far from being a “crone” – two parts of the “triad that symbolizes the Goddess” (15). Thus, by self-identifying as “mother,” a reflection of the sacred feminine, Allione is simultaneously performing both her gender and her spiritual identity.

Triple Goddess imagery, a key symbol for Goddess worship, “depicts aspects of the Goddess and a woman’s life as mirroring each other, each in three stages, with menarche and menopause as the ritual transitions between them” (Culpepper 427). A woman’s life stages are termed “girl / woman / elder,” and are “envisioned as manifesting Goddess aspects of Maiden / Mother / Crone” (427). These stages also echo the moon’s monthly changes, waxing / full / waning, as well as the earth’s yearly seasons, spring / summer / fall.¹ For both the Goddess and women, the third stage passes naturally into the darkness of the new moon or winter – perhaps a literal or symbolic death – before beginning the cycle again. The connection between the constancy of these natural cycles and the specificity of Aloka’s individual transformation is highlighted by the way Allione ends the narrative: “The moon was full as we were going home. Having shed one skin, we were already growing a new one” (21). Their transformations of identity performance and the embrace of new aspects of self are not seen as radical breaks from the norm, but as part of a natural, continuing cycle and a constant sense of “becoming.”

While the girl / woman / elder stages are, on one level, biological ones, this imagery is not tied exclusively to chronology. The “triple Goddess” is not a linear narrative; similarly, the playful “girl” self and the wise “elder” self are always part of the self. There is interplay between these symbols. Based in a concept of holism, not binary structure, the symbols are aspects of the self – “dimensions of a woman’s deep Self” – not simply stages (Culpepper 428).

¹ Interestingly, just as the stages of womanhood, Motherhood, and summer are times of fertility, so too is the full moon: women who sleep outside, in moonlight, will ovulate with the full moon. Note too that fertility – far from being the Goddess’s central focus – is but one of her qualities, and only tied to one stage or aspect of her existence.
Allione’s interest in this symbolic triad of women’s roles was strengthened when she met “an old widow wearing black, with bags of strong-smelling herbs in one hand” (Allione 15). As Allione bought tea from this woman, visited her home, drank her coffee, and looked at pictures of her dead husband, she “thought about the crone, the old woman who holds the mysteries within her. Instead of being honored by her community, however, she lived alone, cut off. With her our female triad was complete – maiden, mother, and crone, all looking for connection and for a way to find ourselves in the world” (15). By identifying this old woman as a “crone,” Allione is recognizing her as a reflection of the Goddess, one who “holds the mysteries within her.” By identifying with her and acknowledging the similarities between them, instead of focusing on differences, Allione recognizes that the aspects of the Triple Goddess have complex meanings, not limited to concerns about reproduction; thus, the Crone is not defined as “she who can no longer bear children” but in terms of “insight from long experience, wisdom, and sage judgment; rage, vengeance, and justice; and knowledge of death and rebirth” (Culpepper 428).

Allione’s concern with the crone is particularly important in that she is preparing herself to become one: “my lunar cycle was already becoming less regular, my hair had turned silver, and I was realizing I would conceive no more babies and was at the edge of becoming a crone” (15). Later, she writes, “I realized I’d begun to bleed, and welcomed this sacred shedding of my womb. My blood was coming less frequently, signifying the end of my time of fertility. Each time it came I was not sure whether it would come again.” (21). Although the ritual she will perform is a way of helping Aloka transition into being a woman, the pilgrimage as a whole (and the meeting with the crone in particular) seems to be an extended ritual through which Allione prepares for this new part of her life. Perhaps it is even her focus on Aloka’s important transition that encourages Allione to be attuned to this changing aspect of her own gender identity. In
meeting the crone, she “realized how, in some way, each phase of being a woman needs to be reclaimed through honoring and celebration. No one would do it for us; we had to do it for each other” (15). As she honored the crone’s “mysteries within,” she constitutes an alternative gender performance that reflects and negotiates this newly emerging aspect of herself: neither “menopausal” nor “no longer a woman,” but a new, complex manifestation of the Goddess.  

As Allione and Aloka both negotiate their identities throughout this pilgrimage, the Goddess’s multiplicity and ambiguity – in that the Goddess represents all possibilities, not one fixed notion of femininity – makes room for both women’s complex identity performances. As these pilgrims perform their identities as reflections of the Goddess through performance (in either the ritual or confessional mode), there is no “preexisting identity” of “Goddess-ness” against which they can be judged “true or false”; instead, each act of performance as the Goddess constitutes their identities in fluid, constantly “becoming” but never “false,” ways (Butler 192).

**Authority of the Sacred Site**

Another distinctive feature of this pilgrimage is the importance of the sacred site, through which Allione and Aloka perform their beliefs about and connection to the past. For Allione and her daughter, *site* was an essential part of their ritual, and granted authority to their performance. Their journey to Crete was a pilgrimage to a place that was sacred to both women at a time (Easter) that celebrates transformation between seasons, the Earth’s fertility, sacred sexuality, new life, the coming of spring and warmth, and the rising “life forces” (16). As this pilgrimage worked in a mode of ritual paradox to bring Easter’s mythical sense of sacred time into the

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Footnote 2: For another narrative of a mother / daughter pilgrimage to Greece, see *Traveling with Pomegranates* by Sue Monk Kidd and Ann Kidd Taylor. Interestingly, their story is also concerned with the Demeter / Persephone myth, intertwined development of one’s gendered and sexual identity and one’s spiritual identity, parallel emerging performances of the daughter’s womanhood and the mother’s perimenopausal initiation into being an “old woman,” and the belief that all three parts of the Goddess’s “triad” are present in each woman concurrently.
present, it linked Aloka’s transformation into a new season of life and her emerging fertility and sexuality (the present moment) with a wider celebration of the Earth’s turning and to the most holy day of Greek and ancient calendars (mythic time).

Within the island, they journeyed deeper, seeking out a location that would facilitate their ritual. On their last day in Crete, while hiking a mountain in search of an appropriate place, Aloka stopped and gasped. “Look, Mom,” she said, pointing down to a small plateau underneath the peak. There was a circle of stones with a small bush in the center. She had found her place. We marveled at the perfection of the circle of stones, each fitted tightly against the other, several feet above the ground, perhaps used for similar purposes in ancient Crete. How had we found this ancient healing circle, with incredible views in all directions? […] We walked to the circle joyfully, and decided to do our ceremony immediately. (18–19)

This stone circle connects the women to the past and to their spiritual heritage, thereby legitimizing their performances at it.

Although Crete itself was significant for the women as a site of “Neolithic culture” and the “sacred feminine,” this small stone circle takes on even more meaning. Allione describes it as an “ancient healing circle,” and suggests that it may have been “used for similar purposes in ancient Crete.” Their initiation ritual is made particularly meaningful in that it is explicitly connected to “similar” ceremonies in the past, notwithstanding the fact that the “ancient” ceremonies once performed here are hypothetical at best. Nonetheless, such repertoiric “ways of knowing” can be re-membered, and continue to transmit knowledge, through performance. In this way, “Through performing rituals at sacred sites, rituals which are sometimes imagined to resemble those performed in antiquity, Goddess pilgrims do their best to perform their pagan
identity” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 494). It is enough for these women that the stone circle suggests that some sort of rituals or ceremonies may have been performed here in some long distant past (and Allione’s photograph matches her description; the stone circle was clearly created with intention and significance); the sacred history associated with Crete is enough to fill in the gaps of history. That is, Goddess worshipers recognize Crete as a site of ancient Goddess-worshiping cultures; stone circles are understood to be sites of ancient ceremonies of some kind; thus, this circle may have been the site of Goddess-worshiping or women-affirming rituals, and so Aloka’s ceremony is legitimized as part of an ancient and sacred tradition.

Christ gives an example to illustrate a similar practice. She describes a ritual conducted in a cave in Crete, and notes that “The women were aware that caves were once viewed as the womb of the Goddess” (Rebirth 28). In this ritual, the women named aloud the women in their “motherline,” their mothers, grandmothers, and ancestors. “As hundreds of female names echoed off the walls of the cave, the group sensed its connection to Neolithic women who may have sat in a circle in that same cave, remembering ancestors” (28). By imagining the ways they might be echoing the practices of their “spiritual ancestors,” these women were strengthened by a felt “connection to a history of female energy and creativity” and encouraged to make that energy and creativity part of their own performances of identity.

By pilgrimaging to and performing at a sacred site, Allione and Aloka enact their membership in an ancient spiritual community and, in so doing, re-member – give body to – their imagined memories about this site and their community’s spiritual heritage. Despite being unorthodox in the way they perform and remember “history,” such “ancient” rituals are legitimized by being connected to such communities; through ritual performance, the pilgrims “transmit cultural memory and identity” (Taylor xvi). Because these pilgrims are performing
with their spiritual ancestors – and even with the Goddess – their rituals carry transformative authority. Even though each ritual performance is unique and invented, it is made orthodox by virtue of the history of the site – whether that history is real, imagined, or somewhere in between.

“Your spirit and your sexuality are not separate, but go side-by-side”

The third important feature of Aloka’s pilgrimage is the way it weaves together her performances of spiritual and gender identity. As Butler suggests, “because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities […], it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections” – in this case, spirituality – “in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (4–5).

Throughout this ritual, Aloka’s performances do not simply constitute her identity as a girl who is becoming a woman or as a person who is coming to reflect the Goddess, but both, inseparably.

Once they found their stone circle, Allione then gave Aloka a white dress – “a Goddess dress” – to wear. When Aloka hesitated at the instruction to “take off all [her] clothes” before changing into it, Allione encouraged her: “It symbolizes letting go of the past and opening to the new” (19). That is, Aloka’s ritual was intended to facilitate a “permanent transformation” in the way she performed her identity, not “a short-term release” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 492). As a time of “opening to the new,” not suddenly changing from old to new, that transformation is also understood as a performance of becoming; it makes room for a new, emergent performance of identity to begin to take shape in ongoing ways that will, ideally, continue to transform Aloka long after the ritual has ended.

Allione then invited Aloka to sit in the center of the circle, and began the ritual by giving her a small marble statue of a Goddess and instructing her to “Kiss the Goddess, and as you kiss
her know that you touch the Goddess in yourself” (19). Because “[t]he tales we tell each other (and ourselves) about who we are and might yet become are individual variations on the narrative templates our culture deems intelligible,” Allione’s ritual of giving Aloka new “tales,” myths, and symbols expands Aloka’s templates for identity performance beyond what “our culture deems intelligible,” and includes “the Goddess in yourself” within Aloka’s ideas about what she is and “might yet become” (Ochberg, qtd. in Leeds-Hurwitz 101). Moreover, through the symbols of “Goddess dress” and statue, Allione does not simply teach her daughter that she is a manifestation of the Goddess, but encourages her to experience this knowledge in a somatic and intuitive way. That is, Aloka is not instructed in archival knowledge, but is given new, repertoiric “ways of knowing” through which she can constitute her identity performatively.

Allione then gave Aloka several other small gifts, symbolic representations of “the sacred feminine” (20). In the center of the circle, the tokens gave Aloka ways to constitute her identity as a reflection of the Goddess. Among these were a “red triangular stone […] that] represents female blood mysteries” and “our connection with the moon and the water of life” as well as a “white triangular stone […] that] represents death and old age, the wisdom of the crone. The triangle is the oldest symbol of the feminine, the womb from which all life comes” (19–20). In this way, Aloka discovers that not only are “the Maiden” and “the Mother” aspects of her identity and “dimensions” of her “deep Self” (not simply stages to pass through), but – even at fifteen – so is “the Crone” (Culpepper 428). The female “mysteries,” including the crone’s “mysteries within,” are now Aloka’s to discover, embrace, and pass on (15).

Aloka then moved around the four directional edges of the circle. At the eastern edge, she was reminded of the importance of holism, and given ways to constitute her identity as

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3 Similarly, Kidd described why she helped her own daughter experience new “ways of knowing”: “I was trying to show her what was possible, because there’s no female journey without someone to show us what’s possible” (223).
intertwined with and connected to all things. As she lit a rope of incense and smelled it, her mother explained: “everything that you experience with your senses can bring you liberation. Unite with the object of your perception and lose the barrier between yourself and the object of your senses. [...] In that moment you will find liberation” (20). This ritual again reinforces the holistic idea that all parts of life – the divine and the human, spirit and sexuality, and the Maiden and the Crone – are all integrated, parts of a whole. As Aloka “unites with” the world around her and embraces all parts of herself, this symbol suggests, she will be “liberated” (from the strictures of traditionally patriarchal gender roles, perhaps, or from the binary logic that stifles creativity) and able to perform her identity as a reflection of the Goddess.

Next, Aloka was given symbols to help her constitute her identity as a sexual being. As they moved to face the sea, Allione gave Aloka a cowrie shell, which “represents the vulva. I give it to you so that you claim your vagina as the gateway to pleasure and birth” (20). This tiny symbol is radical because it rewrites the performances of gender that are available and legitimate for Aloka. She is no longer limited to the traditionally orthodox women’s roles, virginity and motherhood (or the traditionally illegitimate role, “whore”); neither is she encouraged (as the patriarchal system might have it) to see female biology, sexuality, and reproduction as “dirty” or “off limits.” Allione’s statement that Aloka can and should “claim” her female body and sexual “pleasure” as positive is unorthodox enough that it makes the fifteen-year-old girl giggle, and perhaps in a non-ritual context it would simply embarrass her. However, here in this “ancient healing circle” that may have been “used for similar purposes in ancient Crete,” and as part of a pilgrimage and ritual honoring Aloka’s manifestation of the Goddess; it legitimizes Aloka’s developing performance of her gender by connecting it to ancient goddesses and alternative gender models (18, 19).
In my interpretation, Allione’s encouragement to Aloka that she “claim [her] vagina” is not a call to engage in sexual relationships as part of her ritual transformation (as has often been the case in traditional rituals which transform boys into men). Instead, I see it as an expression of the feminist conviction that “women are by natural right as sexually inviolate as men always have been” (Schneiders 11). Schneiders suggests that relatively new laws against crimes such as marital rape and incest are a reflection of this conviction, in contrast with earlier understandings of such acts as “the prerogative of the male head of household” (10). In this section of Aloka’s ritual, I read Allione as echoing Schneiders’s belief that women’s “sexuality is intrinsic to their personhood, and no man has the right to invade it, possess it, control it, or use it for his purposes. […] Sexual inviolability is the symbol of personal self-possession” (11). This idea is also tied in with the FutureChurch pilgrimage’s reclamation of women’s sacred history so as to bring wholeness. In both cases, the pilgrims find it impossible to experience what Schenk called the “wholeness of being human” when their experiences and identities are defined or limited by men. These pilgrims’ performances of identities that are self-possessed and sexually inviolable, or that (as Aloka does below) claim both sexuality and spirituality as inseparable parts of one’s whole person, are performances of challenge against the patriarchal oppression (real or perceived) that seeks to limit their self-definitions or control their sexual expression.

Just as importantly, Allione next helped Aloka to constitute and perform her identity as spiritual by giving her a small crystal “for clarity and spirituality. I give you the shell and the crystal together to remind you that your spirit and your sexuality are not separate, but go side-by-side” (20). As Aloka embodies the Goddess, she is introduced to the mystery of “sacred sexuality”: her femininity and female body are both sacred and sexual, and she does not need to abandon one part of herself to embrace the other (16). As a reflection of divine wholeness and
the sacred feminine, Aloka’s new performance of her identity celebrates femininity and sexuality as part of and inseparable from sacred spirituality. By embracing and performing all parts of her person, she manifests the many aspects of the Goddess, an idea that may seem radical but is, to her, an orthodox belief legitimized by the sacred site, the stone circle, Crete’s goddess heritage, and the Easter celebration of fertility and new life. In this way, just as Allione had recognized the connection between her gender and her spirituality when she identified herself as a “mother” and reflection of the Goddess, she also helped her daughter perform these two identities together.

Finally, on the north side, Aloka enjoyed “the fruit of the journey through the circle” and came to constitute her identity as part of a community (21). Here, Allione had laid out apples and oranges, encouraging her that “The fruits of love are sweet and must be eaten when they are ripe” (21). With the fruits were red eggs, a traditional Greek Easter food and “pagan symbols of fertility and spring connected to the Neolithic goddesses Ostarte, Astarte, Ishtar, and Ashtoreth” (14). Once again, gender and sexuality (represented by love and fertility) are inseparably connected to spirituality (i.e., goddesses and the “fruit” of the pilgrimage). As she offered the fruit, Allione also highlighted the importance of connecting to spiritual heritage, including their symbolic ancestral ties to the goddess-worshiping women of ancient Crete. She told Aloka, “The apple has my blood on it because I cut myself when I sliced it. All the fruits of your womb will be touched by my blood” (21). As Aloka bit into the apple slice, she agreed: “It’s true; all of my fruits will be connected to you, and my fruits will be connected to my children” (21). This connection to their lineage and heritage strengthens the authority of the women’s spirituality and rituals by framing it within a spiritual community and history, tying Allione and Aloka to the ancient women of the past, to each other, and to their responsibility for the future.

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4 Pilgrimages often involve not only a journey to a sacred site, but a journey within it as well; labyrinths and Stations of the Cross are prime examples, but many walking pilgrimages and other also follow this format.
Exchange of Gifts with the Sacred Site

Finally, the women returned to the center of the circle, where they ended with the fourth distinctive feature of their pilgrimage: exchange of gifts. First, Allione gave Aloka a “golden snake ring of the Goddess” and one of the two golden pendants with interlocking spirals that she had bought earlier on their trip. “One of these is for you and one for me,” she told Aloka, “so that we can remember this day and your initiation into the wisdom of Aphrodite” (21). These mementoes become mnemonics, markers of transformation that will remind the women of their new performances of identity. Pilgrims’ mementoes of the site can “serve as bridges between old and new lives, mementos of lives past retained in lives present” (Blasi 178). In this way, Aloka’s ring and pendant will be constant reminders of this ritual’s transformative power, and of the “new life” and new performance of identity she has embraced in this sacred site. Wearing these mementoes will be, in a way, an ongoing confessional performance, in that “confession is to demonstrate where one stands” (Driver 114–15). Indeed, Aloka’s ring and pendant have the potential to announce to others “something particularly important about an identity, something affecting it profoundly”: that Aloka has identified herself with the Goddess, and claimed her membership in this community of spiritual ancestors (Driver 115).

Pilgrims do not only take mementoes from a site; they also give gifts of thanks to honor the site itself. Allione describes: “We sat and ate the rest of the offerings [the wine and fruit], leaving for the ants and vultures what we did not consume, and pouring a libation of wine onto the Earth” (21). Many pilgrims pour out an offering of wine, milk, or water onto an altar-like rock or into the ground; leave some other, usually organic, gift – perhaps a special stone, shell, leaf, or whatever the pilgrim has in her pockets; or occasionally light beeswax candles. Carson even suggests that “chant” “can be your gift to the place as a thank you” (67). These gifts are
offered to honor the Goddess or thank the Earth, to make a reciprocal gift in recognition of the gifts the site has given the pilgrimage, or to mark a more lasting connection between the pilgrim and the powers of the site (not unlike candles left on altars by Catholic pilgrims, which continue to mark the pilgrims’ prayers after their departure). These gifts are signs of respect for the site, whereby the pilgrim acknowledges the Goddess’s power and the site’s living presence, not a “thing” to be used and taken from lightly but an important part of a holistic Earth. They also acknowledge that the ritual it is transformational because of the power derived from what is most sacred – in this case, “an overarching para-human authority, such as a deity” (Santino 126). Within Goddess worship, ritual’s transformative authority rarely stems from the “orthodoxy” of the proper ritual form (as Austin would have it) but from outside – from the earth, from the Goddess herself, or even from the sacred nature of the participants, who, within a holistic view of the world, share divinity with the Goddess and find such divinity and power within themselves during ritual engagement. Aloka’s pilgrimage can be transformative, therefore, because the sacredness of the site and the presence of divinity is how the ritual “works” or is effective.

As Tsultrim and Aloka Allione journeyed to Crete, sought out the area’s Goddess history, and explored it with women’s roles and sacred heritage in mind, they discovered and experimented with alternative gender roles and performances. Allione began to prepare herself to be a wise crone, and sought out and honored positive manifestations of this aspect of the Goddess. Aloka was given new images of women’s power, mysteries, and sacred sexuality, and encouraged to see her full self as a reflection of “the Goddess within.” As they negotiated the meanings these symbols might take on in their own lives, both women came to constitute their gendered and spiritual identities in new ways through performance.
Throughout their performance at a sacred site, these alternative constitutions of identity were legitimized by the women’s imagined, performed connection to the site’s and area’s past, their spiritual heritage, and so were inseparable from their performance of spirituality. As a sacred history was transmitted and re-membered through repertoiric performances, the women’s alternative performances of their gendered and spiritual identities were perceived not as aberrations or radical diversions from proper, “normal” identity performance, but as a return to the powerful performances and egalitarian gender relations of their spiritual ancestors.

Finally, as Allione and Aloka left with mementoes of their pilgrimage, they marked themselves with tangible reminders of their transformative pilgrimage and the possibilities it had opened up for them, embracing their “becoming” and confessing their new identities. As they honored the Earth with wine and thanks, they acknowledged the transformative authority that made orthodox the roles they had performed in ritual and embraced throughout their pilgrimage.

RE-EMBODYING THE GODDESS: PILGRIMAGE TO MALTA

Jo Carson, a filmmaker and camerawoman, recently made a documentary entitled Dancing with Gaia (premiered April 2009), which “includes many sacred sites around the world as well as interviews with women artists, writers, poets, and performers with an awareness of the sacred Earth” (Castle 218).\(^5\) In her director’s statement, Carson explains that the film “is about the nexus of earth energies, sacred sexuality and the return of the goddess as Gaia” and about “how to connect with our earth and the larger cosmos in a spiritual and physical way.” She writes that making the film “was partly a personal pilgrimage; but it was also an opportunity to share with others the powerful beauty of these places of earth centered religion” (Dancing). In twenty-five years of film work, Carson has worked as a camera person for George Lucas and

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\(^5\) See Carson’s website, <http://www.gaiadancing.com>, for more details on this project.
Tim Burton (Castle 217) and directed the documentaries *A Dance for the Goddess* and *Himalayan Pilgrimage* (*Dancing*).

In her essay “Dancing with Gaia and Seeking an Oracle,” Carson describes several of her initial encounters with sacred sites she visited while filming her documentary. This essay is eleven pages long, in addition to Carson’s photograph of Mnajdra. I focus on her narrative about visiting this temple, a pilgrimage that lasted only a few hours and is described in the first four pages of this essay. This particular trip is described in more sensory detail than the others, and Carson calls it “[o]ne of the best times” of shooting her film (*Dancing*). In the balance of the essay, Carson describes her time spent at the temple of Gigantija in Gozo and the temple of Demeter and Persephone in Turkey; she also gives suggestions for those who are “seeking an oracle” and “a healing experience” at a sacred site (65). Although she worked to maintain a sense of pilgrimage as she visited these sites, her primary intention on this trip was to obtain footage for her film. In the temples on Malta, however, Carson had a distinctive experience that she described as a *pilgrimage*.

The Mediterranean islands of Malta are among what might be thought of as Goddess worship’s “prototypical pilgrimage” sites (Turner and Turner 18). Malta is home to several “megalithic temples,” “the ‘earliest free-standing monuments of stone in the world,’” and many believe that “several millennia before Christ Malta was a destination for religious pilgrims from around the Mediterranean” (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 31). Within the past two decades, Goddess pilgrims have begun visiting these temples in increasing numbers. For them, Malta’s Neolithic temples are evidence that the islands, located midway between north Africa and southern Europe, were once likely to have been “a sacred center of influence,” and visiting them is seen as a way of reconnecting spiritually with
these times. In a sense, the temples function as mammoth mnemonic devices, the hard evidence of an imagined (“remembered”) past, where boundaries between memory, imagination and invention dissolve. (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 31)

These ancient temples are, for Goddess pilgrims, among the oldest extant sites of Goddess worship and an important place of connection between pilgrims and their spiritual history.

Upon first entering the Mnajdra, the smaller temple near Hagar Qim, Carson felt called to sit, then lie down, on a rock-slab bench. She describes her experience in this way:

The rock slab is the perfect size and height to lie on. […]

The inclination to lie down is overwhelming. I am alone with these walls that have seen so much. Initiations, births, deaths, weddings, trysts, declarations of love, pilgrims of every color, and now tourists, archaeologists. I feel the miracle of this space being held sacred for so long. Finally following the urge, I lie down, the sun bright red through my closed eyelids. Hard hand-hewn rock supports my back, hips, shoulders, and skull. I feel my body relax, absorbing the sense of this sacred place around me. I open up to images, messages, and dreams. […] I realize that I have made a pilgrimage here. (58–59)

Carson’s “pilgrimage” was almost accidental. She entered the small temple as she did many of the other sites, approaching it with reverence, aware of its importance and attuned to whatever “real connection with the site” she might discover, and hoping for a few moments alone with her experiences before she needed to begin filming it for her documentary (62). At Mnajdra, however, overcome by heat and exhaustion and “awestruck by the realization of how many have sat here before me. […] Over five thousand years of visitors….,” Carson allowed her body to relax into the “sacred space” (58). As she does, she seems to make her next discovery – that she
had “made a pilgrimage here” – for three key reasons: her body echoes the Goddess, she
experiences healing, and she discovers authority through intuition.

**Entering and Imaging the Body of the Goddess**

First, Carson describes her time spent in Mnajdra as a pilgrimage because, inside this
temple, she comes to see her body as a reflection of the Goddess. She was inspired to visit Malta
when she discovered that “the world’s oldest buildings,” its Neolithic temples, “were built in the
shape of the body of the Goddess” (57). These temples were built in the form of a fat figure 8,
with the bottom circle wider than the top one; their contours echo the shape of the many wide-
hipped, large-breasted goddess statues found on Malta. Therefore, pilgrims often think of these
temples as symbolizing “the (architectural) body of the Goddess” (Rountree, “Performing” 106).
With this in mind, Carson writes: “Here, lying in this temple built in the shape of the body of the
Goddess, I feel the peace of being within the Mother – my mother, all mothers, and the Earth
Mother. […] Protected now, in the body of the Mother, I lie, sunlit and dreaming, in her
embrace” (59). Being held safe within the body of the Goddess is, for her, an “intimate and
perfect” experience, a “brief return to the womb” (59). As she sees “the interior of [the Earth’s]
body with my own eyes,” she feels “connections” between her body and the Goddess (59).

These connections deepen as Carson discovers how organically her body fits into the
stone. She relaxes as the rock supports her, reminding her that the Earth “is always supporting
us” (59). She describes it as “one of the most peaceful times of my life. The temples there are all
built in the shape of the full bodied mother Goddess. Lying there really felt like I had gone back
to rest inside her body” (*Dancing*). Another pilgrim to Malta’s temples, Christine Irving,
described a similar experience: “‘Visiting Hagar Qim, […] I did not see the temples as remnants
or ruins from the past but as contemporary sacred space. I lay down against the curved wall, fitted my body within their warm contours, and felt utterly connected to the past, present and future in the great cycle of being”” (qtd. in Rountree, “Performing” 106). Rountree’s analysis of this description is equally apt for Carson’s similar response to the Maltese temples:

    By lying down and curving her body into the curved limestone walls of the temple in which the rounded statues had once stood, Irving [like Carson] mapped the Goddess’s stone body onto her own human body and further embodied her self-recognition as Goddess. (106)

As she rests secure in the body of the Goddess and molds her body to the ancient stone slab, Carson’s performance of her spiritual and physical identity begins to take the shape – quite literally – of the Goddess. Carson’s physical actions at this sacred site are “both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 190). As she takes on the physical “acts and attributes” of the Goddess or a priestess, she actively constructs new meaning for herself, and constitutes her identity differently.

    Moreover, Carson begins to take on the form and purpose of the “Sleeping Lady,” a well-known statue found in one of the Maltese temples and popularly believed to be a representation of a Goddess or the priestess of a Goddess. She writes:

    There is a small statue called The Sleeping Lady in the museum at Valetta, the capital of Malta. Archaeologists have speculated that she was demonstrating dream incubation; the practice of sleeping in a sacred space to cultivate a healing or prophetic dream may have originated in Malta.

    I realize that this is what I am doing as I lie here. Who is so lucky that they don’t need to be healed, physically or emotionally? I realize that I have made a
pilgrimage here; now I am fully present, alert, and open to the possibility of healing. (58–59)

As she finds herself lying on her side on a Maltese temple bench, Carson’s body becomes an image of the kinesthetic position and physical location of the Sleeping Lady. She then suggests that she may have a similar purpose in lying here as did the Sleeping Lady: to incubate a healing dream. Thus, she imagines herself in line with the Goddess; she sees herself as another “Sleeping Lady,” imaging or re-membering the site’s Goddess or Goddess worship. As she slipped into dreaming, she “participated in one of the oldest forms of healing and divination known,” and performed her connection to her re-membered spiritual ancestors, those women who practiced dream incubation here “perhaps longer than five thousand years ago” (67).

Carson’s somatic experience of pilgrimage is transformative in that she sees herself as priestess and sacred dreamer, physically and purposefully connected to Malta’s spiritual heritage.

Moreover, like Christine Irving, she experienced “‘an epiphany: the goddess revealed to me in my own body’” (qtd in. Rountree, “Performing” 105). Her narrative “reveals a mutual process of inscription – even a conversation – between a pilgrim’s body and the ‘body’ of a sacred site,” as she takes on the form of the Sleeping Lady and incorporates this image of the Goddess into her own performance of identity (Rountree, “Performing” 107). In this moment, Carson is engaging in a repertoireic performance that transmits knowledge from the past, the site, the Goddess, or the Sleeping Lady to Carson’s own body. Shaping her body into the form of the Sleeping Lady becomes a performative “way of knowing,” an “[act] of transfer” that “transmit[s] social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated […] behavior” (Taylor 2–3). As she restructures her body in this way and “reiterates” the Sleeping Lady’s behavior, Carson is constituted as a dreamer or priestess. In such performative moments, as Bell notes,
“the molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves” (100). Carson’s physical acts ritually form her into a sacred dreamer, transmitting knowledge to her about this site and its long-lost priestesses through repertoiric “ways of knowing.”

As Carson lies on the bench and dreams, her purpose, actions, and body – her entire physical self – mold themselves into the site. As she “enters the body of the Goddess,” takes on the form of the Sleeping Lady, and allows herself to slip into dreaming, she “transformed her body into a living mnemonic of the place and her experience there” (Rountree, “Performing” 106). Just as Aloka’s spiral pendant is a permanent reminder of her transformative pilgrimage, so Carson’s body will always remind her of the Sleeping Lady and of the way she fit so naturally into this stone temple. In this way, her performance of imaging and echoing ancient goddesses and priestesses transforms her awareness of her spirituality and identity, so that she sees the Sleeping Lady within herself and sees herself within the body of the Goddess.

**Transformation of Spirit and Body**

Carson also recognizes her behavior as “pilgrimage” because it is not only performative (in that she constitutes her identity through it) but also is transformative; specifically, she is “healed” by her experience in the sacred temple. She finds personal healing when her body – her female, corporeal being – is “embraced” by “the body of the Goddess.” She writes:

> Who is so lucky that they don’t need to be healed, physically or emotionally? I realize that I have made a pilgrimage here; now I am fully present, alert, and open to the possibility of healing. I think of the many reasons people seek out the sacred places of the Earth and make pilgrimages to them – healing, inspiration,
atonement, and renewal; connection with ancestors, the Goddesses and Gods, and with the Earth itself. Of these, I believe most people seek personal healing. But what is that? […] Protected now, in the body of the Mother, I lie, sunlit and dreaming, in her embrace. My loneliness, deeply felt as I traveled for so long, drops away in the pure joy of being present. (58–59)

Such healing seems to work through the way the sacred site supports, affirms, comforts, and protects Carson’s physical body while also embracing and connecting to her spiritual or inner being. Similarly, her description of what she did in Mnajdra is inseparably physical (lying on the bench, resembling the Sleeping Lady) and spiritual (echoing ancient priestesses, cultivating a healing dream). Through Carson’s performance of identity during this pilgrimage, these two aspects of herself — physical, gendered form and spirituality — become fully intertwined. As the FutureChurch pilgrims experienced the healing of patriarchal oppression when they were able to perform their gender and spirituality in holistic ways, so too is Carson’s subsequent healing effected by her ritual performance of her physicality and spirituality as inseparable.

Carson goes on to explain that this healing, inspired by physical presence in the site, lasts beyond her time on Malta:

When I think back on Mnajdra, I know it makes all the difference actually to have gone there myself. If I am depressed or in pain I have the memory of it in my body to draw on. […] I have] breathed that air, walked that ground, or found a personal moment of inspiration there. I believe that we need to physically experience a place to be healed by it. Then later, when we need it, our bodies can call on their cellular memories to re-create the healing energy of the place. (59–60)

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6 This statement is echoed by another pilgrim, Caz Love, who wrote: I did not expect “how profoundly the pilgrimage would affect my perceptions of culture – especially since I was already a feminist, anti-violence, pro-
This particularly vivid account again underscores the inseparability of “body-ness” and spirituality, somatic experience and emotionally healing spiritual energy. It also echoes another theme of Goddess pilgrimage: that transformation is long-lasting, affecting the pilgrim in ongoing, even permanent, ways. Carson’s transformation is transformative because it makes space for “becoming.” It does not change her from a person who is “depressed or in pain” to one who is now permanently healed (as, for example, a pilgrimage to Lourdes might do), but instead it gives her a repertoirc or performative tool though which she can continue to effect this transformation. As another pilgrim put it, “The ritual didn’t magically end the power of patriarchy in my life, but it did create an intention, a feat for my soul to replicate. Like most rituals, it was an act of leavening that would go on working in me for months, probably even years” (Kidd 119). In a similar way, Carson’s pilgrimage is transformative in that it is an “act of leavening,” allowing her to perform and constitute her bodily and spiritual identities as interconnected, not once but over and over again.

Therefore, Carson recognizes her time in Mnajdra as “pilgrimage” because it effected a healing transformation in her body (by drawing her into the physical presence of the site) and in her spirit (by connecting her to the sacred site’s ancient Goddess and Goddess worship). As she sees her body as a reflection of the Goddess and performs the ritual role of sacred dreamer-priestess, she experiences a moment of “becoming” and a lasting transformation.

**Challenging Archaeological Authority**

The third characteristic of Carson’s visit that is typical of pilgrimage, and the one that I discuss in greatest depth, is her use of the repertoire, including intuition, to gain knowledge about
the site. Although she has archaeological and historical knowledge about the Maltese temples, Carson seems to treat her felt responses as equally reliable forms of knowledge. As Rountree notes, “a pilgrim’s spontaneous visions and somatic responses to sites may be interpreted by her as revelations, ancient memories and sources of reliable knowledge” (“Performing” 107). Such “ancient memories” and intuited knowledge, however, are tools of the archive, and frequently at odds with archaeological and other archival “evidence.”

Carson arrives at Mnajdra with a greater-than-average knowledge of the temples. She is well versed in the temples’ ages, what little is known about their Neolithic origins, and theories as to their original uses. Based on previous research, she has selected this site to be included in her documentary; upon arrival, she chats about the temples with a young tour guide who “knew his history” (62). Like most pilgrims who choose to visit such far-off places, Carson is well versed in the authoritative version of the site’s archive and history.

Nonetheless, Carson is also open to other forms of knowledge about the site. Before she begins filming, she enters the temple “to experience the place first, to see what draws me” (58). She enters it with respect and recognition, saying “Hello, entranceway. I enter you, recognizing your power to transform me,” and then is open and receptive to what it will give her (58). She engages in dreaming, “one of the oldest forms of healing and divination known” (67). Then, her new knowledge comes in the form of discovery and feelings. For example, she presents two theories about how the temples were originally used, and then explains that one of those “fits my feeling about it”; her statement that she “felt clear as to the purpose of the temple” suggests that this theory is confirmed for her by her “feeling” about it (60). Although none of this information can be proved or confirmed through archival evidence, Carson accepts it as legitimate and true, gifts from the site or the Earth.
Accepting “felt knowledge” about a sacred site as true is important, perhaps even necessary, for pilgrims because it legitimizes their alternative identity performances. That is, Carson’s idea of herself as goddess or priestess cannot mesh with the orthodoxy of a dominant society that does not believe in this Goddess-oriented version of history and that sees human and divine as binary opposites. As such, her self-performance is heretical: it transgresses boundaries established as “orthodox.” However, her performance appeals to a different authority – the repertoire and its felt and imagined, somatic or “remembered” truth. In so doing, it is a performance of challenge to the archive because it makes alternative “ways of knowing” about history visible. As she senses and imagines the temple’s and stone slab’s original purposes, intuits a connection between herself and the priestesses represented by the Sleeping Lady figurine, and finds herself healed by her experience at the site, her felt knowledge that she is connected to the Earth and the Goddess trumps archaeologists’ hesitancy to confirm that these buildings were temples for a Goddess.

Non-archival “knowledge” of the temples is also passed through the performance practices of the repertoire, such as storytelling and even conversation. For example, “According to popular discourse” – not the authenticating voice of archaeological authority – these temples “were the focus for worship of the pre-eminent deity of that distant time, a Mother Goddess or fertility Goddess responsible for the fertility of crops, animals and human communities” (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 36). Because the Neolithic history has disappeared from the archive of knowledge and “so little is known about the original cultural context,” the site’s “Goddess history” is established and passed on through the tools of the repertoire: “popular discourse,” “legend,” “informal conversations,” “fragments of information,” “myth,” “remembered wisps of learning,” and “felt connection” (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 36). In these ways, Carson and other
pilgrims to Malta “learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action,” so that their performances function as “a way of knowing” about the site’s sacred history (Taylor xvi).

These “fragments” form the basis of some Goddess pilgrims’ “detailed, coherent and confident narrative which constructs ancient Maltese society as peaceful, earth-honouring, matrifocal and egalitarian” (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 38). Other pilgrims question the accuracy of this “coherent narrative” but nonetheless embellish “popular discourse […] for contemporary spiritual purposes, and a much larger social and political feminist agenda” (39). Both for Maltese residents (who are predominantly staunchly Catholic) and visiting Goddess pilgrims, much of the most important information about the temples and their history is held exclusively in the repertoire of knowledge, and finds little or no confirmation from the archive.

Indeed, Goddess worship and feminist spirituality have little claim to the legitimizing, orthodox authority of the archive. Without a sacred text, its history / mythology is oral tradition at best, and cannot be backed up by written documentation; it is interested in exploring the “gaps” in what is known about the past, and in remembering (and re-membering) the undocumented, written-over, or long-forgotten people, goddesses, and worship practices. Because of that lack of documentation, the authority of “history” denies this mythology’s claim to validity. Another powerful component of the archive, archaeology, seems to suggest that it (archaeology) is more able to provide more “evidence” for the goddesses and traditions from which this religion claims to descend. However, archaeology too (like history and text) is set up as an official, legitimate, scientific, document-and-archive-based arbiter of knowledge; as such, it works as a determiner of what site-related beliefs, actions, and identity performances are accurate, appropriate, correct, or even allowed – and which are not.⁷

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⁷ Referring to Western archaeologists’ work at sacred sites, one Goddess pilgrim asks: “Was it clear to them that they were operating under a very skewed mentality in their examination process? Did they even consider that
Among historians and scholars, there is now a widely held recognition that “any construction of the past, one’s own or anyone else’s, is governed by the particular contemporary agenda – social, political, religious, or economic – of its creators: different individuals and groups generate different meanings of the past” (Rountree, “Archaeologists” 12). Despite this acknowledgment that “the meaning of the past” is always constructed and woven into narrative, never discovered wholecloth, repertoire-based “knowledge” is afforded little authority; it is always described as “myth” or “legend,” in contrast with archival “fact” and the scientific-sounding “theory.” Thus, the “popular discourse” surrounding Malta and the Goddess pilgrimages that go with it have little authority to determine “orthodoxy” not only because they are based in repertoire, not archive, but also because they challenge the interpretation offered as “legitimate” by the official arbiters of meaning: archaeologists.

In turn, archaeologists challenge (and essentially dismiss) feminist spirituality’s interpretation of Malta’s history. For example, the National Museum of Archaeology published a brochure (c. 2000) that describes Malta’s famous sites, including Mnajdra and the larger Hagar Qim, as “‘examples of a complex form of architecture’ and ‘impressive megalithic buildings [...].’ Nowhere are the structures referred to as ‘temples’, and nowhere are the figurines found in the temples referred to as ‘Goddesses’; rather they are ‘some of the finest examples of prehistoric art’ (Rountree, “Re-Inventing” 45). Similarly, the display of Neolithic material in the National Museum of Archaeology, which houses the figurines known as the “Sleeping Lady” and the “Venus of Malta,” makes no mention of a “fertility Goddess” in any of its information panels. Instead, “goddess” is used once, inside quotation marks, in reference to the “Sleeping Lady”; “fertility” is used once, to describe a case of what are labeled “Phallic Symbols” coming from the Western academic tradition of giving validity only to that which can be seen, heard, tested, proven, repeated, etc., does not make for a very open-minded examination of a sacred site?” (Nervig 99). These questions highlight the contrast between the tangible, “scientific” archive and unorthodox ways of knowing about the past.
(“symbols” that are notably not attached to human figurines); and the numerous figurines with large breasts and exaggerated female genitals are described as genderless “figurines,” if labeled at all (Rountree, “Past” 20). Perhaps because the popular ideas about “Goddesses” and “temples” are passed through the repertoire and cannot be proved (and are therefore perceived as mythical, not scientific) or because they are thought of as “out-of-date,” pilgrims’ ideas about their Maltese spiritual heritage are denied legitimacy by the authoritative voice of archaeology.

For Jo Carson and others like her, an alternative re-reading of Malta’s history, temple structures, archaeological finds, and popular discourse strongly suggests that the site’s history is spiritual and its figurines represent goddesses and priestesses – ideas that are supported through intuition, felt response, and an awareness of the energy of the site. Claiming these sites as Goddess temples is important for these pilgrims because it allows them to connect to their spiritual heritage and it legitimizes identity performances through which they echo the goddesses and priestesses. For archaeology to deny the spiritual significance of the site is not only to challenge these pilgrims’ interpretation of the narrative; it is to deny the validity of their performances of self. Such a denial is compounded because archaeologists do not stop at failing to name the figurines (and, by association, the pilgrims’ identities) as “goddesses”; some go so far as to describe the figurines as “deformed.” In 1959, the British archaeologist, J. D. Evans, who has published the most comprehensive archaeological summary of Malta, describes the small figurines with the large bellies and breasts as “pathological”, “deformed”, “horribly distorted female forms” with an “abdominal tumor”. In 1996, he was still saying that these figures, which look very much like women in a late stage of pregnancy, have a “pathological condition”. (Rountree, “Past” 22)
With this announcement from a preeminent archaeologist and authority figure, the “Sleeping Lady” who proved so significant to Carson’s pilgrimage is denied authority. Moreover, it is not just the figurines that are seen as “deformed”; by association, the performances of gender and spiritual identity represented by the figurines, which pilgrims echo or adopt as their own, are also dismissed by “the authorities” as “distorted,” “pathological,” or even “genderless,” non-female.

Therefore, for pilgrims to legitimize their sacred history and identity, they must continue to engage in performances of challenge to archaeology’s authority as “sole arbiter of knowledge” by re-writing and re-imagining, through performance, the spiritual history of sacred sites. Through ritual performances, pilgrims use the repertoire to re-member the site’s history or sing it “back to life.” In doing so, these pilgrims challenge the status quo by adding a dissenting voice to the discourse of archive, archaeology, and history; claiming other “ways of knowing” as equally viable; and naming their counterpoint narrative and performances as equally legitimate.

Such conflict between archaeology’s archival authority and feminist spirituality’s concomitant lack thereof can be seen in a recent excavation at Çatalhöyük in central Turkey, which, like Malta, is considered one of Goddess pilgrimage’s “prototypical” sites. James Mellaart’s 1960s excavation of Çatalhöyük and discovery of many clay figurines known informally as “Mother Goddess” figurines, as well as Marija Gimbutas’s writing about the site in *The Language of the Goddess* (1991), have “led modern followers of Goddess spirituality to adopt Çatalhöyük [like Malta] as a quintessential Goddess site. Journeying there is a sacred pilgrimage to one of the earliest sites in the world where evidence of reverence for the divine feminine has been uncovered.” It is “is a place of inspiration, healing, learning, and celebration of the divine feminine” (Rountree, “Archaeologists” 9). However, the voice of “inspiration” is clearly *not* the voice of authority at the site.
Instead, the excavations at Çatalhöyük offer a striking example of the polarization between archaeologists (who arbitrate the site’s orthodoxy) and goddess pilgrims (who challenge this authority through performance). In her analysis of this phenomenon, “Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük,” Rountree explores “how one voice or vocal category (archaeology) acquires interpretive authority while another (Goddess feminism), which produces a dissenting interpretation, does not […], and how the former voice consequently gains power over the latter” (14, italics added). In the multivocal context of an archaeological dig, a museum display, or even a historical narrative, the repertoire-based perspective of Goddess spirituality is almost automatically disenfranchised because of the unquestioned power of the archive.

The power of the archaeological authority at this site is particularly interesting because the director of archaeology, Ian Hodder, had established the Çatalhöyük archaeological project as an “experiment in multivocality”: “multivocality was explicitly incorporated within the research design and reflexivity was employed as a deliberate strategy in the construction of archeological knowledge” (Rountree, “Archaeologists” 8, 13). To that end, in 2003 he invited Rountree to the site to create a display panel for the visitor center representing the Goddess perspective on the site’s importance, and has also welcomed goddess pilgrims to tour the site on other occasions.

However, the archaeological team’s chosen “way of ‘doing multivocality’” was based in what Hodder described as “‘a desire to reach a consensus” (Rountree, “Archaeologists” 16). The result has been a near uniformity in the archaeologists’ published findings about the site, and thus a sense that these findings and theories (which dismiss Mellaart’s and Gimbutas’s earlier ideas about a Neolithic Goddess-centered religion practiced here) are more “up-to-date.” Because the archaeologists are all in “consensus,” there is little room in the discussion for anything other than the “official” view. Moreover, the archaeologists “enjoy official sanction as
the scientific voice with the most up-to-date theories. There is no doubt that their voices dominate in any contest over who produces the ‘correct’ interpretation of Çatalhöyük” (16–17, italics added). Because the archaeologists are supported by these legitimizing factors, they have exclusive authority to interpret Çatalhöyük’s archival materials (including buildings, bones, and figurines), to establish the site’s “orthodoxy,” and to enter that one, uniform and seemingly unchallenged, interpretation into the official archive of “scientific” and academic publication.

The archaeologists’ official position was made vividly clear to Rountree as she created her “Goddess Perspective” display – despite the fact that Hodder invited her to do so as a means of encouraging multivocality. Her description is useful to quote at length:

The process of setting up this display […] emphasized the position of the Goddess voice as other in relation to the archaeologists’ interpretation. After I drafted the text, Ian [Hodder] said he thought it would be “inclusive and politic” to post my text on a dig-house notice board to see whether any of the archaeologists objected.

When I asked about the politics of giving one interpretive voice (archaeologists) the right of veto over another (the Goddess perspective) in a multivocal context, Ian said that it wasn’t a matter of silencing or arguing against the Goddess view, it was more a case of whether “we as a group should give space to radically alternative views.” […] This situation underlined the fact that it was in the archaeologists’ power to give space (or not) to another voice, and that all voices were very differently empowered. […] The fact that the display from the Goddess perspective was restricted to two portable panels (like the display from the perspective of the local village women) also emphasized the otherness or “alternative” nature of these two voices in relation to the archaeological
interpretation, which was fixed to all the surrounding walls, implying that it was
more stable, comprehensive, and official. (“Archaeologists” 19)

At Çatalhöyük and Malta – and, similarly, at other archaeological dig sites and “scientifically”
interpreted sacred sites – any dissenting interpretation is a challenge to the site’s official,
legitimized “history.” Even in the open-minded, dialogue-based setting of Hodder’s “experiment
in multivocality,” Goddess spirituality (and its interpretation of the past, claim to spiritual
heritage, and use of rituals as ways of re-membering) is seen as “radically alternative,”
powerless, unstable, and unofficial. Therefore, the pilgrims’ identity performances (which some
hope echo performances of long-forgotten women, priestesses, and goddesses) are, if even
acknowledged by the voices of authority, dismissed as a-historical and illegitimate, “radically
alternative,” or “other.” To claim a connection to the goddess or to perform feminist spirituality
at such sites is to reject – and, perhaps, to re-write – the sites’ orthodoxy.\(^8\)

Pilgrims’ alternative performances of gender and spiritual identity are not simply a matter
of “doing things a bit differently”; they are subversive performances of challenge, not only to the
dominant understanding of a site’s history but also to the very authority of the archaeological
archive to determine and legitimize that dominant interpretation. Because “archaeological
discourses are generally attributed in scholarly and popular contexts with greater authority and
legitimacy” than Pagan discourses, they are “consequently accorded greater interpretive power
(and often power authority in discussions about access to sites and their representation in
museums and visitor centres)” (Rountree, “Performing” 104). That is, the “orthodoxy” that

\(^8\) In similar ways, the Sacred Sites, Contested Rites / Rights project examines “physical engagements with sites,
theorizing how ‘sacredness’ is constituted from different standpoints, and exploring the implications of modern
Pagans’ engagements with sites for heritage management and archaeology more generally” (Rountree,
“Archaeologists” 12). These “different standpoints” are, like Carson’s and Rountree’s, performances of challenge
because they reject the limits of archaeological orthodoxy and re-imagine “sacredness” from multiple perspectives.
However, challenging archaeologists’ authority and interpretation does not necessarily mean working against
archaeologists; many Goddess pilgrims instead work with archaeologists at sites (as Rountree did), suggesting
interpretations and reminding archaeologists that “interpretation begins at the trowel” (18).
Goddess pilgrims must work against and rewrite is not only religious in nature (primarily Christian doctrine, which makes no room for “the Goddess”) but is also archaeological, and tied up in the western rationalism that privileges archaeology (and, similarly, history and textual documentation) as scientific, unbiased, legitimate, and authoritative. As Taylor notes, it is “because Western culture is wedded to the word, whether written or spoken, that language [i.e., the archive] claims such epistemic and explanatory power” over the repertoire (Taylor 24). In response, Goddess pilgrims present an alternative interpretation of the past, challenge archaeology’s authority to be the “sole arbiter” of historical interpretation, and suggest that the tools of the repertoire – ritual, myth, public discourse, intuition and somatic response, dreaming, and self-performance – are equally viable strategies for interpreting and connecting to the past.

Like Rountree’s display panel, Jo Carson’s interpretation of Malta’s temple was a performance of challenge to the authoritative interpretive voice of archaeology, dissenting with the official views presented by the Archaeology Museum’s. Instead, Carson used the repertoire – intuition, dreaming, and felt connection with the site – to discover her own interpretation of its history and meaning. In doing so, she challenged the official dismissal of the temple’s figurines as “distorted” or genderless and reclaimed the Sleeping Lady, whom she re-membered, as a priestess to the Goddess and a legitimate model by which to constitute her own performance. As her connection to the site’s sacred history and energy deepened, she felt both confirmed in her interpretation of her spiritual heritage and healed by her transformative embodiment of the Goddess. Her discovery that this visit was a pilgrimage, not “research,” confirmed her sense that this site was sacred and legitimized her new identity performance as a sacred dreamer, connected to the Earth, in the ancient tradition of Malta’s goddesses and priestesses.
THREE KEY GOALS OF GODDESS PILGRIMAGE

Allione’s, Aloka’s, and Carson’s pilgrimages have several elements in common. First, all three women performed their gender and spirituality as inseparable parts of their identities, which they constituted as representations or manifestations of the Goddess. Doing so was an effective tactic through which they could claim authority to define gender in alternative ways, and through which they experienced healing. Second, they used repertoires of performances to connect to their sacred “heritage” and to “sing back to life” those spiritual ancestors who have been erased by the archive. Third, they used performance to challenge an archival authority they understand as oppressive and to create models with which they can work to transform the future.

To Constitute Gender in New Ways

In keeping with the values of feminist Goddess worship, many pilgrimages aim to “contribute to a radical re-inscription of the female body by exposing women to alternative representations of the feminine and by providing contexts in which the feminine can be re-imagined, re-experienced and performed differently through symbolic activity and ritual” (Rountree, “Performing” 99). Such “alternative representations” are considered vital because of the belief that patriarchy can be oppressive to women. For example, harmful representations of gender include denying women power independent from men, imaging the Judeo-Christian God in exclusively male ways, or associating the female with the “lower” half of binary divisions (and so with dark, dirty, human, sinful, bodily, and fallible). Such representations contribute to women’s “wounds of patriarchy,” what Kidd refers to as “the feminine wound” or “the original sin of being female” (28), by limiting the performances of femininity that are “possible” – i.e.,

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9 During the fourth century, church leaders believed that women were inherently sinful and did not even have souls. They devised two methods “by which women could find salvation”: virginity, or marriage and child bearing. ‘Both involved roles of silence and subordination in which the stigma of being female could be overcome,’” (Kidd 69–70).
appropriate, legitimate, or “orthodox.” For example, orthodoxy is oppressive to women when it establishes “virgin” and “wife / mother” as the only “normal” women’s roles. Because such “orthodoxy” is understood as oppressive, it is rejected as the “way of knowing” about gender, the feminine, and the female body. Similarly, the “notion that nature and the body need to be denied or transcended and dominated is seen by Goddess feminists as a legacy of Judaeo-Christian ideology,” a religious belief that, despite being “orthodox,” is false (at best) and destructive, and therefore needs to be challenged, transgressed, and re-written (Rountree, “Lion” 164).

In response, Goddess pilgrims see this prejudice against the female body and its sexuality as a tradition – an interpretation of the world and human experience based on religious ideology – not as a legitimately “orthodox” belief. In response, they do not choose simply to believe in a different interpretation; instead, they perform their challenge of it, working outside of this oppressive archive and embracing the repertoire’s rituals, sacred sites, and myths about the past in order to imagine other ideas of what femininity can be and to perform other, “alternative representations” of women and the female body. Such experiences often center around the Goddess’s body, a connection with the presence of a divine feminine, or re-imagined gender roles. For example, as Aloka embodied the Goddess, Carson took the form of an ancient priestess, and Allione thought of herself as a reflection of the Triple Goddess’s multiple aspects, each woman performed her identity in a way that was both spiritual and gendered. As Allione put it, “your spirit and your sexuality are not separate, but go side-by-side” (20). In these ways, pilgrims focus on and celebrate the female body, both the Goddess’s and their own; in doing so, they are able to rename themselves and see themselves as manifestations of the divine. “The idea that divinity is immanent potentially liberates women from the legacy of a religious and cultural tradition which invokes a conflict between the spirit and the flesh and tells people,
especially women, that their bodies are dirty and sinful” (Rountree, “Lion” 165). Celebrating femininity and the female body as sacred is a direct challenge to centuries of patriarchal thinking that imagines women and their bodies as dirty, leaky, and uncontrolled (and therefore in need of masculine control). Moreover, these pilgrims recognized that performing their spirituality and gender as inseparable is transformative: Carson felt a sense of healing, while Allione and Aloka each began to transition to a new aspect of Triple Goddess-based womanhood. Indeed, women’s re-claiming of their bodies, sexuality, and power, and their re-naming it as sacred, is seen as a way of healing individual women’s “wounds of patriarchy” and transforming their performances.

Pilgrimages embrace the body by emphasizing a physical, sensory experience and a felt or intuitive connection with the Goddess or the sacred site. For example, Christ’s tour of Crete promises a sensed experience of the Goddess: the pilgrim will “Feel Her power in holy mountains, sense Her mysteries in the darkness of caves […]. Contact a sacred energy that will transform the way you feel about women, yourself” (“Goddess Pilgrimage”). This tour, as do most, also celebrates physicality in ways that may seem less “sacred” at first glance, but are embraced as an equal part of the sensory, sacred ritual of pilgrimage: “Stay in small villages, meet local people, dance to Cretan music, feast on freshly cooked fish.” There is no room here for division between divine and sacred or between body and soul; instead,

Goddess pilgrims believe in the earth’s power to heal body, mind and spirit to create an uninterrupted and whole self. By making the journey to the sacred place and by consciously engaging bodily with it, women enact self-healing. This is achieved more powerfully by their performance of symbolic acts and by conducting healing and celebratory rituals in the place. (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 486)
As Aloka discovered throughout her ritual, all parts of her identity are reflections of the Goddess. As pilgrims are enveloped in “the body” of the Goddess or experience felt connection with ancient priestesses, as Carson felt herself to be, they begin to sense this connection to the Goddess. Thus, it is through these women’s “performative and imaginative practices at sacred sites, that the phenomenon of their own sacred being, shared with the earth and all other individuals, is named into being” (Rountree, “Performing” 112). Similarly, through ritual and the knowledge passed through the repertoire, Aloka and other pilgrims “experience their female bodies as sacred” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 494). For many, this is both personally healing and culturally transformative: “healing” is a central aim in that “Feminist Goddess Worshipers seek through ritual not only profound changes in self and other, but also basic change in ‘the dominant culture’” (Stuckey 147–48). Imagining bodies – their own, others’, and the Earth’s – as sacred promotes a world view based in holism, responsibility for others, and respect.

As they do so, many pilgrims come to see themselves as reflections of the Goddess. To identify as “goddess” is, in Butlerian terms, to perform gender differently: to produce alternative images of gender. This tactic is a means by which women can create a new “corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 190). Such performances of alternative gender roles are “political acts,” as pilgrims “transgress and de-stabilize familiar societal norms for women as they simultaneously institute new norms and reproduce themselves in accordance with them” (Rountree, “Performing” 107). Instituting and reiterating “new norms” – including the many “faces” of the Goddess – while celebrating those alternative images as sacred manifestations of the divine is terrifically transgressive: it suggests that these new, “not
normal” images of women are not aberrations but are equally legitimate. In this way, they concur with Butler: there are no “right” or “wrong” performances of gender.

This is not to say that women think of themselves as the Goddess; instead, this performance of identity is a tactic by which women can symbolically claim the power that the symbols represent: they image themselves as strong and autonomous, as having the right to choose and direct their own lives. Self-identification in these ways is a symbolic act of self-empowerment by which women permit themselves to acknowledge, legitimate and connect with both the sacred, strong and the dark, dangerous aspects of themselves. In doing so, they are re-membering themselves, reclaiming aspects of themselves which they have been denied legitimate access. By re-membering the witch and the goddess, women are re-membering themselves. (Rountree, “New Witch” 212)

Images of “goddess” – and its other half, “witch” – are seen as transgressive and inappropriate: too powerful, independent, and uncontrolled, and therefore dangerous. According to patriarchal norms, they are not possibilities for “normal” women. However, “By deliberately playing with, deconstructing and transforming the stereotypical meanings of the two images, [Goddess pilgrims] are accepting Cixous’s challenge to ‘write themselves out of the world men have constructed for them by putting into words the unthinkable / unthought’” (Rountree, Embracing 187).  

Thus, identification as and performance of “goddess” or “witch” are rejections of the way patriarchal, “orthodox” thinking has defined these terms, and ways of re-imagining what other gender roles are “possible” for women. Reclaiming and re-imagining these and other

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10 Perhaps it is because these pilgrims’ identities reflect what is “unthinkable / unthought” that they can best be created through the repertoire, not established through the archive. Kidd writes: “When we create paths that are utterly new and outside sanctioned models, […] our paths are often dismissed or overlooked. ‘The new space,’ Mary Daly rightly observed, ‘has a kind of invisibility’” – that is, it is “unthinkable” – “‘to those who have not entered it’” (191).
symbols is a powerful tool. “In reshaping symbolic reality, women have the power to transform the world. Symbols and archetypes are not static; they [...] are living reflections of human religious experience. As we reclaim the world of symbolic language for our own purposes, we claim the power to enter it and alter its future” (Roberts 29). These women suggest that claiming and re-defining symbolic language is a way to reject the roles for and definitions of women created by patriarchy, and that imagining themselves as “goddess” can “transform the world.”

Recognizing one’s body as sacred or claiming independent power are not simply matters of “feeling good about oneself”; instead, they are vital performances of challenge because they reorient authority. That is, as pilgrims come to see themselves as “aspects of the Goddess,” they learn “to locate authority in themselves, to give themselves license to construct and conduct their own spirituality (unmediated by minister, priest or priestess), [...] to trust their own judgments and intuition, to take responsibility for their lives” (Rountree, “Lion” 160). As with Catholic feminists, once these pilgrims are able to see in themselves the *imago Dei*, the image of God/ess, they claim the authority to engage in liturgical and ritual creation, recognizing that the power to create symbols or to name themselves is the power to constitute their theology. For religious practice, the arbiters of orthodoxy are “the authorities,” those instilled with special access to the divine: ministers and priests. By rejecting this requirement and conducting their own rituals, Goddess worshipers re-write what – or who – can legitimize spiritual orthodoxy. Moreover, as these women claim authority over their spiritual practices, they also claim that authority over their performances of spiritual and gender identity.

Aloka, Allione, and Carson each constituted their identities and female bodies in new ways through performance. In performing themselves as manifestations of the Goddess, they came to see that their “spirituality and sexuality” are not separate, but interconnected. This
experience was transformative because it embodied a sense of wholeness, which is itself healing because it does not force them to attempt to “separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler 4–5). Seeing themselves as imago Dei also gave them the authority to name and symbolize their world in alternative ways, and, in so doing, to constitute their theology. As these pilgrims used ritual to re-interpret the world and their experience, they were able to performatively constitute their gendered, bodily, sexual, and spiritual identities in new ways and to name these alternatives as equally – if not more – legitimate than those established by patriarchy’s “orthodoxy.” In this way, rituals such as Aloka’s initiation and Carson’s dreaming re-write what gender performances are available to, and acceptable or “orthodox” for, these women.

To Re-member Sacred Heritage

The second goal towards which these Goddess pilgrimages have worked is to establish and connect to the religion’s “spiritual heritage,” including the practices of ancient women and Goddess priestesses. As Castle suggests, sacred sites connect “contemporary women with the ancient women of the past” (xxxi). For some women, the past is important because proving that patriarchy was “invented” – that it has not always been the case – is seen as key to re-imagining the future. Others seek to connect to the past as a way of legitimizing their alternative performances of spirituality and gender, as both Aloka and Carson did. Above all, “the past” is important to most Goddess worshipers because it grants them a sense of tradition, history, and connection. Thus, pilgrimage “is a way of enacting their membership of a religious community which existed in antiquity rather than in the present” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 492).
Such goals, however, are seemingly impossible. This religion, after all, has no “history.” It was invented only recently, and pilgrims can neither prove the past they imagine nor hope to “echo” it with any accuracy. This absence of history is particularly problematic given what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs sees as “religion’s complex and potentially paradoxical relationship with the past” (Castelli 13). Particularly at moments of ideological change (such as the development of a new religion), “narratives of origins may be problematized [and] historical legitimations for contemporary practices may be questioned.” At the same time, however, religious innovation must always be couched in the past’s terms, Halbwachs argues, and so religious reforms will most often be described not as departures from but as reclamations of the past. “Even at the moment that it is evolving, society returns to its past,” he writes. “It enframes the new elements that it pushes to the forefront in a totality of remembrances, traditions, and familiar ideas.” (13)

Castelli gives several examples, including early Christianity, which, “for all its talk of a ‘new covenant’ and a ‘new creation,’ nevertheless rooted itself in existing national narratives and epic pasts” (13). Similarly, even though it is largely without an archive, contemporary Goddess spirituality frames its innovations as “memories” and “reclamations of the past.”

Despite the fact that it is not granted the “authority” of the archival record to lay claim to any history or memories, Goddess spirituality claims a connection to the past. Specifically, it uses pilgrimage to create a “memory” and a spiritual tradition. As a ritual, repertorific performance of belief, pilgrimage involves the transmission of social knowledge and memory through embodied practice. However, because neo-Pagan religions are relatively recent constructs, they have a unique relationship with history and memory; thus, their pilgrims “remember” differently than do others. Additionally, because of their belief in holism, they do
not see a sharp division between collective memory (which is socially constructed in the present as a subjective view of the past) and “history” (which claims to be objective); instead, memory and history blend together in performance, and the past is always being interpreted in the present.

As Allione, Aloka, and Carson did, Goddess pilgrims use the repertoire to “remember” (and re-member) the past in two related ways. First, these Goddess pilgrims claim connection to the past by using performance to create a “spiritual heritage” or “collective memory” for their religion. At sacred sites that encourage connection to divinity and to the past, they perform rituals “which are sometimes imagined to resemble those performed in antiquity” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 494). These rituals are invented in the present – many of them created on the spot, as Aloka’s was, or inspired by sensed connections or dreams, as Carson’s was. However, framing them in connection with ancient traditions is a way of creating a (paradoxically) new tradition and establishing a spiritual heritage. Thus,

Through their bodily presence and ritual enactments in sacred places, Pagan pilgrims assert the ancestral roots of their modern Paganism. Some of the rituals they do […] are creative, symbolic performances of the connection they feel with the ancient communities for whom the site was sacred. They are means of claiming a spiritual heritage. (Rountree, “Performing” 104)

As these “creative, symbolic performances of the connection they feel” are repeated and re-imagined by Goddess pilgrims, they begin to acquire the force of collective memory. As Halbwachs argued, memory, however individual it may seem, is always created within a social framework. Thus, “Through retelling – whether narrative, performative, representational, even liturgical – memory accrues meaning through discursive and embodied repetition” (Castelli 11–12). Such “retellings” and “embodied repetitions” are, importantly, the work of the repertoire.
Such a construction, however, seems to depend upon there being a past for memory to preserve and retell. Within Goddess worship, however, the remembered (and re-membered) past is largely a mythical, not a historical one. Neither Carson nor Aloka can “prove” the existence of the deity whose power made their pilgrimages ritually effective. Instead, they perform their identities in line with narratives that are mythical but nonetheless effective because they “forge links within a community among its members and between the community and its claimed past” (Castelli 30). For example, Allione and Aloka’s belief that they were ritualizing in a stone circle “perhaps used for similar purposes in ancient Crete” (18) and Carson’s statement that, just as the Sleeping Lady incubated sacred dreams, “I realize that this is what I am doing as I lie here” (58–59) connects these performances to those other, long-lost members of this “community” who may have ritualized in similar ways.

Moreover, these pilgrims’ telling and “retelling” (through story, performance, embodiment, and ritual) of a mythologized past or an ambiguous and largely undocumented deity “accrues” quite a bit of meaning indeed, as the performative practice of pilgrimage establishes a collective memory for the religion. Repeated and re-membered, individually and collectively but always within a social framework, this collective memory becomes the timeless “tradition” of a thirty-year-old religion; indeed, “performance is a mode of existence and realization that is partly constitutive of what the tradition is” (Leeds-Hurwitz 101). In this way, pilgrimage can be an active “part of creating the ‘memory’ that […] can be seen] as crucial to defining the nature of religion,” rendering past, myth, and present all meaningful threads woven together into Goddess pilgrimage’s “spiritual heritage” (Swatos 91). Because pilgrimage is performative, it constitutes this history; because it is ritual, it can work in a mode of ritual
paradox to *transformatively* bring this ideal into existence. In both ways, as pilgrims embody and perform their “spiritual heritage,” they bring that tradition into being.¹¹

Through pilgrimage and ritual, participants create and maintain their “spiritual heritage,” a collective memory of a mythologized past. By re-membering the past in ways that emphasize (or create the illusion of) continuity over time, ritualized and transmitted through the repertoire, Goddess pilgrims’ “collective memory does the work of ‘tradition,’ providing the conceptual and cognitive constraints that render past experience meaningful in and for present contexts” (Castelli 12). Although Goddess pilgrims have a short history and very little by way of archival past, they effectively transmit their religion’s collective memory through the performative, and transformative, work of ritual pilgrimage. As they do so, they also constitute that “memory,” paradoxically authenticating a sacred heritage or “history” they themselves have constructed.

The second key way in which Goddess pilgrims claim connection to the past is by using repertoiric performance to circumvent and challenge the archive’s “orthodoxy,” imaginatively “filling in the gaps” of archival history and giving voice to those who have been silenced. For many such pilgrims, the focus is not on the possession of “authentic,” prove-able history or memory, but works through an awareness of gap between those two constructions of the past (history and memory). By emphasizing that “history” is incomplete, and that it privileges archival record at the expense of the repertoire, Goddess pilgrims highlight the fact that many communities have been disenfranchised from the history-making process, and that their history is

¹¹ Goddess pilgrimage’s invention of sacred sites’ “memory” is not as unique as it may seem, although it is perhaps more easily observed than that of other religions. Indeed, the social memory surrounding *all* pilgrimage sites is always being re-interpreted and re-imagined through performance. For example, as one pilgrim to Walsingham, a supposedly ancient English pilgrimage site, noted “‘I have a sneaking suspicion that […] we’ve invented it [this site’s meaning] for ourselves,’” but “‘I don’t think it matters.’” This pilgrim “states eloquently the idea prominent among some visitors that pilgrimage derives its value from being constantly reinvented in performance rather than becoming a fetishized container of fixed structures of authority” (Coleman and Elsner 61). Indeed, all contemporary pilgrimage must, in some ways, re-imagine the religion’s past in order to create a “memory” in the present.
Indeed, many feminist Goddess worshipers, Wiccans, and neo-Pagans might list themselves – and, with a fair amount of validity, the ancestors of their belief traditions – among such “communities whose stories have not been preserved because they lie outside of the dominant, public narrative of political or institutional history” – that is, outside of the archival record and the orthodox narrative of history (Castelli 22). Because Goddess pilgrims are not granted the authority of the archival record, they stress “the importance of memory as a source for an otherwise unrecorded past” (22). It is only through the performance of the repertoire that they can “make visible those social actors, scenarios, and power relations that have been overlooked and disappeared over and over again” (Taylor 278).

Therefore, one of the most important functions of pilgrimage is to create, remember, and give visibility to the collective memory of communities that have been left out of the historical record – specifically, ancient, women- and Goddess-focused social and religious traditions that, according to these pilgrims, have been destroyed, replaced, and silenced by patriarchal societies. In this way, “memory can take on the force of ‘counter-memory’ (in Foucault’s terminology), offering a powerful alternative to official narratives that may mask social suffering” (Castelli 22). The performance of such “counter-memory” is a performance of challenge to the archive’s “official narratives” and power to erase and silence. Pilgrims “give voice” to these silenced communities through performance, as they sense or imagine the “ancient memories” of the site and use ritual to re-member those lost memories and “sing them back to life.” Often, these rituals “are the result of intuitive, somatic responses to a sacred place […] Imagination, interpretation and performance weave a tight cord connecting the pilgrim to the place. The past ‘bubbles up’; the line between memory and imagination blurs” (Rountree, “Performing” 104).

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12 For example, as Taylor describes of the Spanish Conquest, “the importance granted writing came at the expense of embodied practices as a way of knowing and making claims” (18).
Thus, because these ancient societies have been so utterly silenced that, not only is there little or no record of them, but there is not even consensus on whether or not they existed at all, the work of creating and giving voice (and body) to the memories of such societies is simultaneously radical (in that it flouts the archive’s orthodoxy) and conservative (by reclaiming what has been erased). In this way, Goddess pilgrims’ performance of the repertoire’s collective memory, with its “dissenting voice” or alternative interpretation, is a legitimate, powerful way to reject and counteract archival history’s orthodoxy.

**To Challenge Patriarchy and Transform the Future**

As Goddess pilgrims re-imagine gender roles and connect to their spiritual heritage, they also work toward their third goal: to challenge patriarchy’s claim to “orthodoxy” in a way that will transform gender relationships in the present and future. Here, the first two goals come together: as women imagine and re-member the egalitarian social structures of the past, and are inspired by those visions to perform their own gender in alternative ways, they begin to heal “the wounds of patriarchy” – the ways that the patriarchal system is prejudiced against and harmful toward women. As Castle puts it, “It is not easy to overcome or heal thousands of years of patriarchal conditioning and its influence and manifestations in our own psyches, lives, or world. But if we are to do this, we must integrate with the living Earth, the Gaia-field” (Castle xxxii). Although personal transformation of gender performance may seem like an individual, not politically useful, endeavor to some outside critics, these pilgrims believe that “Self-healing of [‘the wounds of patriarchy’] needs to precede, or is a basic component of, the healing of society” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 486). As was the case among Catholic pilgrims, Allione’s, Aloka’s, and Carson’s ritual performances gave way to those in the confessional mode – and
would then, ideally, lead into the ethical mode of working towards social change. In this personal-is-political way, Goddess pilgrims seek to transform the future of patriarchy through their narratives about the past and their physical, bodily experiences in the present. Goddess pilgrims work towards transformation in at least two significant ways. As they performatively create and transmit a “sacred heritage,” they constitute a social model with which to transform the future; as they constitute their identities in alternative ways, they challenge patriarchy’s power to restrict women’s self-performances.

First, Goddess pilgrims use imagination to mythologize about the past and their connections to it, in order to create a model for the future. As with any spiritual tradition, myths about the past, particularly origin myths, are a vital force in establishing the religion’s orthodoxy and shaping its future. Here, “myth,” the “product of collective imagination, […] produces a unified account of the past and a unifying account for the present and an imagined future. Myth is the text of a utopian dream, a dream about a complete and seamless story that has the capacity to suture the present (and the future) to the past” (Castelli 30). Goddess pilgrims would likely replace ideas of “unification” with an intentional ambiguity or multiplicity, and remember that no historical narrative is ever “complete” or “seamless.” Nonetheless, it is often the express purpose of Goddess pilgrimage and ritual to imaginatively, performatively “remember” a mythical, utopian account of the past so as to unify the religion’s adherents (both past and present) into a spiritual community; to “forge links” between this collective group and its history, however unknown or utopian; and to use that idealized “account of the past,” seen through the hopeful present, as a model for an ideal future. Much of feminist Goddess worship has this very process at its heart, mythologizing the more egalitarian social structures that could have been present during times of possible Goddess worship, then re-membering that past in their own
bodies, paradoxically bringing “what might be” into the present through ritual, with the intent of creating such social systems in the present and the future. These pilgrimages and other rituals allow participants to critique, *and to change*, the social structures of their world.

Dolan’s suggestion echoes this idea:

> Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological “doings” we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (7)

In the utopian moment, as participants imagine an ideal future through ritual, they also “critically rehearse” the ways in which they can effect this change and work toward a transformed future. It is for this reason that such utopian performatives are imbued with a “soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire” – because they make the hoped-for possible (7–8). Similarly, for Turner, “cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing […] the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting ‘designs for living’” (qtd. in Driver 189). Repertoiric mythologizing and performatively constituting a spiritual heritage are useful strategies, that is, because they allow these pilgrims to “sketch out” alternative “designs for living.”

As they do this carefully and consciously, this community of women work to “make sense of their own present through recourse to constructed narratives of their pasts” (Castelli 11). One way to “make sense of their own present” is to constitute alternative, Goddess-inspired
identities through ritual, and then to claim these identities through confessional performance (perhaps by wearing a ring, publishing a narrative, or creating a documentary). What is significant here is the way in which “the confessional mode of performance modulates into the ethical. The ethical is implicit in the confessional all along, for confession always changes the relation between self and world” (Driver 116). Thus, these pilgrims are likely to follow ritual performance (i.e., constituting narratives about their spiritual communities) with ethical performance, by using those narratives as a springboard from which to shape the future.

Moreover, ritual is always political action: we “exercise in ritual action our creative capacities to re-order that state of affairs. Rituals may […] celebrate and render articulate the shape and rhythms of a new emergent vision” (Delattre, qtd. in Driver 190). This is the goal of many Goddess pilgrims: to “render articulate,” through the performance of collective memory, “a new emergent vision” of egalitarian social structures. By imagining a utopian “state of affairs” and embodying it through pilgrimage, Goddess worshippers bring to life Driver’s claim that “Rational political methods alone cannot bring about transformation of society from a less to a more just condition, because they cannot fuse the visionary with the actual (the absent with the present) as rituals do, thus profoundly affecting the moral life. Nor can ideas alone do this, for in order to bear fruit they require flesh-and-blood performance. Ritualization is required” (184). In this way, ritual is effective, what Turner calls a “transformative performance,” as it creates the ideal by bringing the subjunctive future into the present. In such ways, by engaging in pilgrimage and ritual, Goddess worshipers are intentionally “constructing a new spirituality which they believe […] ‘has the potential of doing extremely deep healing work for the culture” (Rountree, “New Witch” 213).
As with other religions, such “origin myths” do not need to be prove-able – or even true – to be powerful. To that end, Dolan quotes feminist theorist Angelika Bammer: “I want to counter the notion of the utopian as unreal with the proposition that the utopian is powerfully real in the sense that hope and desire (and even fantasies) are real, never “merely” fantasy. It is a force that moves and shapes history” (7). In that they give shape to “hope and desire,” utopian visions such as Goddess pilgrims’ myths about the sacred past can in fact “shape history,” both the way that history is remembered and told and the ways in which mythologizers use that utopian image to shape the future.

For example, the search for “nonoppressive spiritual alternatives,” including ancient Goddess traditions, was, especially at the start, interested in re-seeing the past so as to challenge the “orthodox” idea that “male domination and female subordination were, indeed, ‘natural,’ caused by our genes or our stars, as accepted scholarship contended. If, however, the origins of male domination could be traced to specific times and places, if it had not prevailed in all societies, then one might envision a future without it” (Ochshorn 377). 13 The resulting “golden age” theories are myths that became important to Goddess spirituality and, although they are “ultimately undemonstratable,” they nonetheless have had important effects. First, they “tended to expand our imagination of the humanly possible,” that is, what gender relations and social structures humans might be able to develop or experience. By ritually re-membering alternative structures and identities in performance, they transformatively made those alternatives possible. They also “helped to relativize the universalism of the male God of Judaism and Christianity, as well as that of patriarchal social and religious structures” – that is, to challenge the “unchanging” authority of the archive (Ochshorn 378). Indeed, there are strong ties between the early women’s

13 Many theories about the “origin” of male domination have been proposed. The idea I find most intriguing is that it developed alongside, or as a result of, the spread of alphabetic writing and left-brained thinking, as suggested by Leonard Shlain in his 1998 book The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image.
movement in the Christian church, feminist consciousness-raising strategies, and myths about the
Goddess. As these Christian and post-Christian women came to learn about goddesses and the
Feminine Divine, including but by no means limited to Sophia and other feminine aspects of the
Judeo-Christian God, they responded through all three of Driver’s modes of performance. For
example, these women began to create their own rituals and liturgy inside and outside of church
– that is, to use ritual performance to constitute and transmit theology differently. As some
began to identify themselves as imago Dei and thus legitimately able to seek ordination, others
left the church and created new spiritual homes – two types of confessional performance through
which women publicly identified their spiritual, gendered self-identities. These performances
also led into the ethical mode of performance, through which women worked in many ways,
including changing the church’s use of exclusively masculine language to define God, to
transform the deeply embedded patriarchal structures of Church and society.

Whether or not they are “historical,” origin myths and spiritual heritage, as constituted
through performance, are important for the work of transformation because they grant legitimacy
to a religion or other community. The spiritual heritage of stories and legends, traditions and
repertoiric practices, and ancient sacred sites calls upon the authority of spiritual ancestors –
founders, disciples, martyrs, and what the book of Hebrews calls “a cloud of witnesses” – to
vouch for the religion’s orthodoxy. Claiming a link between the practices of church founders or
early leaders and contemporary spiritual performances suggests that those contemporary
performances are not new (no matter how radical or “alternative” they may seem); they are part
of ancient tradition, and therefore legitimate. This pattern is also true for Goddess spirituality in
particular, as its myths grant authority to contemporary performances and – as Allione’s and
Carson’s connections to ancient women at those sites revealed – the Goddess pilgrim’s

14 “Sophia,” or “wisdom,” is celebrated as a feminine aspect of God or as “God’s female soul” (Allione 17).
“experience of *communitas* feeds and enhances her spiritual and feminist political identity and her sense of oneness with women across temporal and cultural boundaries” (Rountree, “Goddess Pilgrims” 491). These pilgrims’ rituals are legitimized for them by an appeal to the repertoire: they are seeking and imagining themselves to be part of a centuries-long line of women’s performances in honor of the goddess. Riane Eisler, author of the book *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), which was highly formative in “reclaiming our lost Goddess heritage” and establishing the movement’s origin myths, writes that out of her research on this subject came the understanding that much that is happening in our time, including the women’s spirituality movement, is not new or radical. It has ancient roots in a more peaceful and egalitarian time when what I call a partnership rather than dominator model determined relationships. Equally important, my work made it possible to see that the women’s spirituality movement is integral to the contemporary struggle to create a more partnership-oriented world. (xi–xii)

Goddess spirituality’s beliefs and myths about the past, whether they are well researched or half-imagined (and most such myths are probably both), establish that contemporary pilgrims’ alternative performances, although they may not match up with mainstream orthodoxy, are nonetheless legitimate because they are in line with even older, and equally orthodox, ideas about spirituality and gender. As women perform these alternatives in ritual, they move naturally into the “confessional mode,” claiming membership in this half-mythical “community” of spiritual ancestors. Then, inspired by the alternatives made possible through ritual, they shift into the “ethical mode” of performance and work to transform social structures in the future.
The second way in which Goddess pilgrims work toward transformation is by using ritual to constitute their identities and bodies in alternative ways, so as to challenge patriarchy’s power to restrict women’s self-performances. This may happen through ritual, through sensory connections to the site, or by a change in the way a woman experiences and thinks about her own, gendered body. Often, these pilgrims’ rituals are healing because they allow the pilgrims to constitute their gendered and spiritual identities as inseparable – for example, as when Carson felt her body and spirit to be connected and was able to perform her identity as holistic, or when Aloka was given the symbols through which she could perform her sexuality and spirituality as equally sacred reflections of the Goddess. This personal transformation, effected in the ritual mode, often leads naturally into the ethical mode of performance, which “aims to affect society directly, through actions that are political” (Driver 120). As Rountree describes this process, “By making the journey to the sacred place and by consciously engaging bodily with it, women enact self-healing. […] Having experienced personal healing and transformation, the woman feels she can work more effectively with renewed inspiration and vigor for various female ideals” (“Goddess Pilgrims” 486). Such “self-healing” not only “inspires” performances in the ethical mode, but it also makes those performances possible.

Christ’s description of the pilgrimage she leads illustrates this well:

In traveling to Crete, we seek to connect to ancient women, to a time and place where women were at home in their bodies, honored and revered, subordinate to none. We seek knowledge of a time when women and men came together freely without the spectres of domination and control, self-loathing and shame, that have marred the relation of the sexes for thousands of years.
We have found that the ancient stones speak. Descending into caves we feel grounded in Mother Earth and in the sure knowledge of the power of our female bodies. We seek to heal the wounds of patriarchy, violence and war. We hope to participate in the creation of ecologically balanced, peaceful cultures in which every woman and man, every creature and every living thing is respected and revered for its unique contribution to the web of life. ("Goddess Pilgrimage")

This description is rich with meaning. First, Christ suggests, pilgrims will “connect to ancient women” – creating myths about the past, giving voice to those forgotten women, and establishing their own spiritual heritage. In doing so, they will also, by re-membering those women with their own bodies, begin to feel the power of being “at home” in their own, female bodies. This performance of cultural memory is sacred, and therefore powerful to transform, because it is set “in Mother Earth,” in caves that are important both according to origin myths (caves were believed to have been seen as the Earth’s “womb,” places of feminine power and renewal) and because of a felt connection to the real presence of the Feminine Divine. Inspired by myth, ritual, the presence of the Divine, positive images of alternative women’s roles, and a new comfort with performing one’s gendered body as powerful, these women’s next thought will be of transformation (that is, of performance in the ethical mode): healing the Earth’s wounds and creating a holistic, interconnected society marked by peace and respect.

Re-imagining performances of gender, creating and celebrating myths that reinforce these alternative performances, and connecting to sacred sites through ritual can and will, Goddess pilgrims believe, lead to transformation of the self and of society. As Rountree argues, “the Goddess pilgrimage is even more radically anti-structural than Turner envisaged in that pilgrims do not seek merely a short-term release from the constraints of the normative social order and
mundane daily routine. Ultimately their political goal is the permanent transformation of the
dominant patriarchal social order” (“Goddess Pilgrims” 492). For them, this patriarchal order is
the “orthodoxy” and archive-based authority that must be challenged, overturned, and replaced
with a new orthodoxy – a new way of seeing the world; an egalitarian, holistic relationship
between genders and among all things, one born out of the repertoire of ritual, embodied
performance of identity, ancient myth and oral tradition, and an imagined lineage of
performances and rituals that honor and connect to the goddess and the earth.

On pilgrimage and in ritual, Goddess worshipers perform their identities in ways that,
both in gender and in spirituality, image their understanding of the Goddess. These alternative
performances are highly unorthodox according to the patriarchal system, in that they imagine
“woman” according to new definitions, symbols, and characteristics and, through ritual,
constitute identity in these new ways. However, by appealing to their “spiritual heritage” of
imagined history and hoped-for “spiritual ancestors” and by experiencing a felt connection to
sacred sites, pilgrims such as Allione, Aloka, and Carson imagine themselves as echoing ancient,
sacred performances. By using repertoiric “ways of knowing” to connect to and transmit
knowledge with their spiritual ancestors or the Goddess, they legitimize their own performances
of identity. In constituting these new identities as reflections of the Goddess, they expand the
range of alternative definitions of women and social structures that can be thought of as
orthodox. Because these rituals then lead pilgrims to shift into the confessional and ethical
modes of performance, they suggest that, by ritually constituting their own identities in new
ways, pilgrims such as these three may begin to transform society from patriarchal to egalitarian.
CHAPTER SEVEN. CONCLUSIONS

Performance, Della Pollock suggests, is “the process by which meanings, selves, and other effects are produced. […] It is the embodied process of making meaning” (20). This, in a nutshell, has been my argument throughout this study: that it is through the performance of pilgrimage, identity, and ritual that pilgrims “make meaning.” I have introduced three pilgrimage narratives into the scholarly conversation, and provided the background necessary to understand these journeys within their religious contexts. I then studied pilgrimage, a spiritual practice, through the lenses of performance studies, gender studies, and ritual studies and, in so doing, revealed the natural ways in which these fields worked together. Throughout this study, I have suggested that pilgrims use the performance practices of pilgrimage and ritual in order to constitute and perform their gendered and spiritual identities in ways that are often highly unorthodox. Furthermore, pilgrimage allows participants both to engage with and to re-see religious history and orthodoxy, so as to legitimize their alternative, transformed identities.

Three strains of thought have been particularly helpful in this study, allowing me to tease out and tie together the many ways in which performance “makes meaning” through pilgrimage. First, Pollock says, performance produces “meanings.” To understand this, I turned to Diana Taylor’s ideas about the archive and the repertoire, and suggested that pilgrims’ performances include both re-reading the archive and transmitting knowledge through the repertoire. First, pilgrims frame their performances as legitimate spiritual practices by situating them within the “orthodoxy” of the archive: history, archaeology, and theology. By journeying to sacred sites in Rome, Crete, and Malta, these pilgrims suggest that their pilgrimages are “prototypical,” and so that they “dramatically manifest […] the orthodoxy of the faith from which they have sprung.”
(Turner and Turner 18). However, unlike most pilgrims to “prototypical” sites, these pilgrims take a different, unorthodox view of “history,” suggesting that these sites were sacred to women’s ancient or prehistoric spiritual performances, and that they reflect the lost history of women’s ordination or goddess worship. Re-seeing history this way is what I have called a “performance of challenge,” through which pilgrims destabilize the archive’s claim to sole interpretive authority and bring into question its claim that there is one, “natural,” stable, or unchanging “past” that can be studied. In particular, these pilgrims used their performances of challenge to question the orthodoxy of the Vatican’s declaration against women’s ordination and to challenge archaeologists’ and historians’ interpretations of goddess temples such as those in Malta. The pilgrims also challenge patriarchal systems’ definitions of “femininity” and limitations of what gendered, spiritual roles are “appropriate” or available for women. Because these orthodoxies are supported by the archive’s seeming stability, pilgrims’ performances are effective ways of suggesting that other interpretations are also legitimate.

The repertoire is also important to these pilgrims because it offers other “ways of knowing” through which pilgrims can constitute and transmit knowledge; interpret, remember, or imagine the “past”; and connect to and perform *with* “spiritual ancestors.” For example, as Jo Carson incubated a healing dream, she constituted knowledge about the temple’s purpose. Tsultrim and Aloka Allione remembered and imagined the “past” that was their sacred heritage by ritualizing in a sacred circle in ways that, they believed, echoed long-lost performances in the same spot. In Rome, FutureChurch pilgrims constituted knowledge *with* their sacred ancestors, breaking bread with Prisca and praying with Phoebe and Theodora Episcopa. In these ways, placing their performances of ritual and identity within a “historical” context (by re-seeing the
past) and a “spiritual heritage” (by performing repertoire with ancestors), these pilgrims appealed to different authorities and legitimized their unorthodox, alternative identity performances.

Pilgrimage is also a performance through which “selves” are produced. Here, I turned to Judith Butler’s suggestion that actions and performances are not expressions of a previously existing (or “true”) identity, but effectively constitute identities. This theory is particularly useful when studying performances such as these, because these pilgrims perform their gender and spirituality in such unorthodox (that is, seemingly “false”) ways. Whether performing as priestly bread-breakers, as manifestations of the Goddess, or as priestesses, these pilgrims all use ritual acts to constitute their identities as *imago Dei* – an identity not usually thought of as “orthodox,” especially for women. Throughout their pilgrimages, these women shaped and constituted their identities through ritual. For example, the FutureChurch pilgrims’ bread-breaking constituted their identities as priestly, while Carson’s embodiment of the Sleeping Lady’s form constituted her as a dreamer. Like kneeling in prayer, these physical acts “produce” those attributes and bring them into being (Bell 100). As with the gifts that Allione gave her daughter and with the new meanings of bread-breaking constituted in Rome, rituals also provide the pilgrims with new symbols, allowing them to image and perform their identities in alternative ways. Butler’s suggestion that identities are constituted “discursively,” so that “it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained,” is also useful here (4–5). As the FutureChurch pilgrims performed as “women priests,” as Aloka performed her spirituality and her sexuality holistically, and as Carson experienced healing in both her body and her spirit, these pilgrims all constituted their gender identities in ways that were interwoven with, and inextricable from, their spirituality and other “modalities” of identity. Because these rituals and other ways of performing identity
are “not expressive but performative,” they “effectively constitute” the pilgrims’ alternative identities and legitimize them by revealing that they are not “false” (Butler 192).

Third, pilgrimages are performances through which “other effects” are produced. As ritualists such as Tom Driver have suggested, ritual performances produce such “effects” because they are transformative, and have the power to effect change. Because they work in a mode of “ritual paradox,” rituals can bring the ideal – including the imagined past, the pilgrims’ new identities, and the hoped-for future – into the present. This can transform and legitimize the participants’ identities because it makes these identities not just what could be but, as they are brought into being through ritual, what is. Ritual’s embrace of paradox also allows pilgrims to negotiate ambiguity and between multiple symbolic layers. For example, all of these pilgrims used ritual to perform an interpretation of ancient, sacred “history” that is both “true” and imagined. The FutureChurch pilgrims also negotiated multiple but simultaneous meanings of priestliness or bread-breaking; Aloka and her mother embraced identities that reflected multiple “faces” of the Goddess (for example, all parts of triple goddess) at once; and Carson created and transmitted knowledge about the Maltese temples with – not just about – the Sleeping Lady.

As Driver also suggested, these performances in the ritual mode lead naturally into performances in the confessional mode, as pilgrims claim membership in a spiritual community or identify themselves in new ways. For example, as these pilgrims ritualized, they also came to identify themselves as “priestly,” as imago Dei, or as reflections of the Goddess. They also “confessed” themselves as descendants of the Biblical “women witnesses,” as members of the community of women who have met in the Catacombs of Priscilla since the second century, as co-ritualizers with the long-ago goddess worshipers on Crete, or as priestesses who have incubated healing dreams in the Maltese temples. Significantly, this also leads to another set of
“effects”: the transformations that are part of the “ethical mode” of performance. Following their performances in the ritual and confessional modes while on pilgrimage, these pilgrims responded by working to challenge patriarchal systems and transform their church or society.

As they re-read history and challenged the archive’s authority and its claim to “orthodoxy,” these pilgrims suggested that other, alternative performances might also be understood as “legitimate.” They then used the tools of the repertoire as other “ways of knowing” about history, spiritual traditions, and gender roles. As they engaged in these repertoiric performances, they “effectively constituted” identities and knowledge that, although alternative, are not “false,” and which therefore expanded the range of “legitimate” identity performances available to spiritual women. Because the pilgrims constituted these identities through ritual, they were able to bring what should be or might be into existence, inviting them to engage in “becoming,” transforming their identities in many ways, and preparing them to work for continued, ongoing transformation.

As I bring this work to a close, I am excited by the wide range of possibilities it presents for future research. After having studied others’ performances so closely, I look forward to an opportunity to go on pilgrimage myself, and to consider these performances of repertoire, identity, and challenge from within the body of the pilgrim. Turning closer to home, I am also interested to think about how other seemingly orthodox forms of spiritual practice, such as liturgy, can also be performances of challenge to the systems they negotiate. Additionally, my work has also not considered any spiritual traditions that do ordain women, and those who have studied these religions have been largely concerned with how women priests perform gender differently. I suggest that performances of gender or “priestliness” among lay women have also been affected by the ordination of women, and would be interested to trace the ways in which
this shift has affected women’s spiritual and gendered performances. In these ways or others, I do hope to continue to study women’s spiritual practices, both contemporary and in earlier periods, in terms of performance and transformation.

Although I have focused on women’s performances throughout this study, that is certainly not to say that men do not go on pilgrimage or constitute their identities in similar ways. However, there are far fewer studies considering contemporary performance of men’s identity – particularly alternative meanings of “masculinity” – through spiritual practices such as pilgrimage.¹ Within contemporary Western culture, it is probably more radical for men to constitute “masculinity” in unorthodox ways than for women to challenge patriarchal definitions of “femininity,” and there is interesting work to be done here as well.

As women (and men) continue to constitute gender in new ways, their performances of spirituality will also be affected. At the same time, as theologies shift and women ritualize and perform their spirituality differently, they will also come to constitute their gender in what now seem to be “unorthodox” ways. However, because these performances of identity are performative and transformative, they will continue to affect, and perhaps even to shift, the definitions of “orthodoxy.” As these pilgrims use the tools of repertoire to perform knowledge about the past and to constitute and confess their identities in the present, their eyes are also on the future: challenging the archive’s ability to limit orthodoxy, expanding the range of gender roles that are available to women or can be considered spiritually “legitimate,” envisioning utopian alternatives, and transforming the world around them from what is – a patriarchal system of oppression – into what could be.

¹ Larry Russell’s “Three Pilgrim Paths” is an important exception. (Theatre Annual 58 [2005], 1–65. Thanks to Ron Shields for bringing this article to my attention.)
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