HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE WOMAN DRIVER?
CHICKS, MUSCLE, PICKUPS, AND THE
REIMAGINING OF THE WOMAN BEHIND THE WHEEL

Christine L. Lezotte

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Committee:

Susana Peña, Committee Chair
Catherine Cassara
Graduate Faculty Representative
Ellen Berry
Vikki Krane
ABSTRACT

Susana Peña, Committee Chair

Popular perceptions of the woman driver have long relied upon two persistent stereotypes. The original woman driver stereotype – which depicted the feminine driver as passive, inept, and overly cautious – was developed during the post World War I era in an effort to limit women’s mobility. In the decades following World War II, as a means to distinguish women’s driving experience from that of men, the woman driver was reconfigured into an individual who called upon the automobile to reaffirm her culturally approved gender identity as caretaker and consumer. Despite women’s growing influence as auto owners and drivers in the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of these stereotypes ensures that the female motorist will continue to be regarded in a limited and often negative way.

This project examines three alternative constructions of the woman driver to expose the fallacy of current representations as well as to suggest infinite new possibilities for women behind the wheel. Looking at women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks through the lenses of material culture theory and gender performativity, this investigation considers how three groups of women challenge historical and societal directives in order to create a legitimate and empowering place for themselves as drivers in the hegemonic masculine climate of American car culture. Moving away from historical analysis and representation, it focuses on the automotive experiences of real women through participant observation at automotive events, online observation of various car groups, as well as in-depth interviews with over 100 female motorists. This method of inquiry not only reveals the speciousness of existing stereotypes, but also demonstrates how three populations of driving women have successfully reconfigured, reclaimed, and reimagined the “woman driver” category to make it their own.
For nearly a century, the auto has been identified with masculinity and male mobility, and women’s right and ability to use cars has been disputed.

Virginia Scharff - *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*

But in my car, I'll be the driver
In my car, I'm in control
In my car, I come alive and
In my car, I am the driver
Watch me now!

Shania Twain - “In My Car”
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PROLOGUE

Over the past two decades, there has been an unwavering effort by feminist scholars and social historians to recuperate the woman driver from automotive history. The determination of these individuals has not only resulted in the recovery of women’s early motoring experiences, but has shed considerable light on the strategies developed by auto makers and marketers to constrain women’s automobile use. The construction of a woman driver stereotype, coupled with the repeated association of driving ability and technical expertise with the male driver, became an effective strategy to deter women from taking the wheel during the first half of the twentieth century. My mother, the daughter of a Polish immigrant who came to Detroit for employment in the auto factories, was born in 1919. Like many women of her generation, she never learned to drive. Thus when my father’s unexpected death in 1959 forced my mother to raise her three young children on her own, she did so without the benefit of a driver’s license. While this would have been an inconvenience in any circumstance, it was particularly problematic while growing up in a working-class Detroit neighborhood without reliable public transportation during the 1950s and 1960s, an era often described as the golden age of American car culture.

I spent my Motor City childhood on foot, buming rides, or traveling on unpredictable Detroit busses. The lack of a car in a neighborhood populated by auto factory workers marked us as outcasts; as each year passed, I became repeatedly disappointed and frustrated in my mother’s refusal to take driving lessons. My mother’s exhausting three-bus, hour-and-a-half-each-way trip to her job as a Detroit Public School secretary each morning, coupled with her weekly one-mile walks to the local supermarket, drug store, and laundromat, not only made me determined to obtain a driver’s license as soon as legally possible, but more importantly, raised my awareness of the importance of the automobile to women’s mobility, autonomy, and independence. On my
twenty-first birthday I purchased a car with my own money in my own name. My 1970 VW Beetle – the only affordable choice for financially strapped college students such as myself - became my daily transportation to Wayne State University, and allowed me to seek employment upon graduation without considering bus routes and schedules. My burgeoning feminist sensibility, coupled with my very own flower-adorned-red Bug provided me with the opportunity to drive away from the gendered prescriptions regarding women’s automobile use and to assume the identity that had forever eluded my mother: Woman Driver.

However, my identity as a woman driver – independent, self sufficient, and capable - differed significantly from the gendered construction offered by the auto industry and its marketers. This became abundantly clear during my professional career when I was hired as an art director/copywriter at McCann-Erickson Advertising in 1981 to work on the Buick account. I soon discovered that the timeworn association between the automobile and masculinity carried over to the mindset of car advertising agencies. The women who worked in automotive advertising, as well as the women who were the target of automotive advertisers, were considered lacking in automotive knowledge, unfamiliar with the driving experience, and subject to the influence of male automotive “experts.” It was assumed that the female consumer would buy the vehicles the male dominated auto industry deemed suitable for the woman driver, and it was believed that the woman in the creative process would rely on male directed research rather than her own car experience. George Green, a retired advertising executive who worked on the General Motors account, admits that automakers routinely “denigrated the female market,” and made little effort to learn about the woman car buyer (qtd. in Gerl & Davis 210).

When I started working on the Buick account, the Regal Coupe was an outdated behemoth of the product line rapidly losing market share. While General Motors had historically
been reluctant to market directly to women for fear of devaluing a particular vehicle, the Regal – already on the downslide – was considered an appropriate target for the woman driver. Auto industries have traditionally attempted to market unpopular cars to women when “authentic” automobile aficionados, aka male drivers, will no longer buy them. (Buick, traditionally referred to as the ‘doctor’s car,’ was also expected to appeal to a class of individuals who embraced a particular ‘comfortable’ lifestyle). Thus it became my job to reconfigure and sell the Regal as the “woman’s car” to upscale female consumers.

The commercial that eventually aired was certainly not what Buick expected. I took it upon myself to reconstruct the woman driver from uninformed, passive, insecure, and uninvolved to intelligent, confident, financially independent, and car savvy. Playing with the stereotype of women as being primarily interested in the car’s color, I presented the female consumer as a smart and stylish individual capable of making her own automotive decisions while having some fun at the expense of the men in her life in the process. While I don’t know how many Regals the commercial actually sold, I was successful, for 30 seconds at least, in altering the common perception of the woman driver (fig. 1).

Alas, this revised vision of the woman driver was short lived. In 1983 Lee Iacocca introduced the minivan to the world, and the woman driver became immediately and forevermore associated with motherhood. Despite the existence of women whose cars hold meaning other than transportation for kids and cargo, the perception of the woman driver as a (white, middle-class, suburban, young) mother concerned primarily with reliability, safety, and economy - rather than an individual of any race, age, class, sexuality, and/or marital status who prefers an automobile linked with power, performance, and fun - stubbornly and emphatically remains three decades later.
After exiting my advertising career, I returned to school to pursue a degree in women’s studies. While in the master’s program at Eastern Michigan University, I enrolled in a course on “Gender, Technology, and Popular Culture.” One of the units focused on the automobile and featured an excerpt from Virginia Scharff’s groundbreaking Taking the Wheel, a social history of women’s early automobility. When I inquired if there was any other automotive scholarship of note focused on the woman driver, I was told there was very little; therefore, it was suggested that women and automobiles would be a fruitful subject to pursue if I had any interest in doing so. Although I have never been what one would describe as a car “nut,” my Detroit upbringing, coupled with my past auto advertising experience, led to my decision to pursue a PhD so that I might add to the literature focused on the woman-car relationship.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that my interest and investment in this subject matter is deeply personal. As an individual who is neither a man nor a mother, I have been historically ignored by the auto industry simply because I do not conform to its narrowly focused conception of what a woman driver should be. I am joined by thousands of driving and car owning women who due to their age, race, ethnicity, class, marital status, geography, and sexual orientation do not fit the white, middle-class, responsible young mother stereotype that, since the introduction of Lee Iacocca’s minivan, has become synonymous with the woman driver category. I undertook this examination of women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks not only to reveal the presence of women drivers who do not identify as white suburban “soccer moms,” but to also demonstrate how automakers and marketers continue to underestimate and

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1 In a historical context, “automobility” is defined as the utilization of automobiles as the major means of transportation. However in Republic of Drivers, cultural studies scholar Cotten Seiler equates “auto mobile” to self-mobility or self-governance. Automobility, asserts Seiler, is a marker of republican citizenship and modern American identity; in the United States, the act of driving represents what it means to be free. Historian Kathleen Franz defines automobility as “the association of personal mobility with the automobile and ideas of independence” (“Automobiles” 55).
misrepresent the driving woman. The invisibility of alternative constructions of the woman
driver in auto industry rhetoric, the media, and popular culture suggests that, in the twenty-first
century, automakers remain complicit in the reinforcement and maintenance of gendered
attitudes toward women’s participation in car culture and in the world at large.

The woman driver stereotype depicted women of my mother’s generation as too nervous,
maladroit, flighty, distracted, uncoordinated, and incompetent to be taken seriously behind the
wheel. Women of the baby boomer generation, whose sheer numbers on the highway could not
be denied, were acknowledged as drivers primarily within the context of motherhood. The
tenacity of these representations in the twenty-first century suggests the woman driver is still
perceived in a very constrained and clichéd way. Nearly thirty years ago I attempted to change
the common perception of the woman driver through an advertisement that reflected my 1980s
feminist sensibility. There were attempts by other auto advertisers during the post feminist era to
present the woman driver as “bold, capable, and independent.” However, as both the Reagan
“family values” agenda and the media driven backlash against feminism gained steam,
representations of confident and competent women drivers quickly vanished from public view.
Thus while this dissertation is a requirement for the completion of my doctoral degree, I also
view it as a second chance. I hope to call upon this opportunity to bring renewed attention to the
woman driver, not as a cultural stereotype, but as an individual who ascribes new meanings to
cars based on her own automotive experience, and whose gender performance reflects how she
imagines herself as a woman behind the wheel. Through the myriad voices of female motorists, I
hope to challenge the perception of who the woman driver is, and what she ultimately can be.

2 In “The Liberated Lady Driver,” published in 1987, Beth Kraig discusses a then-contemporary Mercury television
commercial (378).
Figure 1. “All Mine.” The 1983 Caddy Awards (The Creative Advertising Club of Detroit, 1984) 86.
CHAPTER 1: THE WOMAN DRIVER

Introduction

Cultural constructions of the “woman driver” have existed since women first expressed the desire to get behind the wheel of the gasoline-powered automobile. The original woman driver stereotype was developed during the post World War I era in an effort to limit women’s mobility. Its most prominent expression was through humor; the woman driver – as nervous, flighty, mechanically inept, and accident prone – quickly became a frequent subject of cartoons,


Figure 3. “There’s Only One Safer Place Than a Volvo to Carry Young Children.” Communication Arts Advertising Annual (1986) 32.
editorials, burlesque, comedy routines, and popular jokes (fig. 2). In the decades following World War II, the woman driver was portrayed as an idolized and idealized consumer and caretaker (fig. 3). This stereotype originated in the auto industry as a means to divide automobile use by gender and thereby reassert the association of mechanical expertise and automotive skill with the male driver. Both constructions have persisted into the twenty-first century; as social historian Virginia Scharff argues, automakers continue to invoke women’s “unchanging biological natures” to diminish women’s automotive knowledge and driving ability as well as to market the practical and reliable “woman’s car” to female consumers (“Wheel” 116).

Current representations of the woman driver in advertising, the media, and popular culture reflect the determined efforts of auto manufacturers and marketers over the past century to depict the woman driver in a limiting manner. Old woman driver jokes have received new life in cyberspace. Despite the plethora of automotive possibilities, the auto industry continues to recommend “family vehicles” to the woman behind the wheel. The association of women with a particular type of vehicle and driving experience; the assumption that women lack automotive expertise and mechanical ability; the belief that women’s interest in the automobile is centered primarily on safety and reliability; and the notion that women get behind the wheel mainly to fulfill the role of family caretaker and chauffeur collectively contribute to a dominant and rarely challenged construction of the woman driver. In the current automotive culture climate, there is little thought to the possibility of alternative constructions.

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While there have been recent attempts to present the woman driver as an individual who enjoys the driving experience, it has been carried out through predictable scenarios; i.e. consumerism or sex. Ford, for example, promotes the Escape and its peppy Eco Boost engine by interviewing “competitive owners” (some of them paid actors) taking a test drive on a winding test track (Ford Eco Boost Challenge). However, as a crossover driven primarily by women (66.1%), the Escape’s “fun to drive” aspect can be considered a marketing strategy to separate it from the Toyota RAV4, its strongest competitor. In 2008, Cadillac endorsed its CTS luxury sedan by featuring Grey’s Anatomy star Kate Walsh behind the wheel (Peterson). When she asks, in her sultry voice, “when you turn your car on, does it return the favor?” it could be argued that Walsh (and Cadillac) is directing the question to male, rather than female, drivers.
However, despite their invisibility in American car culture, women who do not conform to prevailing representations of the woman driver exist. There are some women, in fact, who do not view the automobile chiefly as a functional necessity, but rather, consider it a source of identity, an opportunity for performative display, or as the means to an experience that is exciting, enriching, and exceptional. They are not passive or reluctant drivers, but enjoy the act of driving and the sensations that accompany it. They are not automatically drawn to cars that are economical and dependable, but more often take the wheel of vehicles that are powerful, impractical, spirited, distinctive, and/or fun to drive. These women are not usually found in station wagons, minivans, SUVs, or crossovers, but are more likely to be gunning the engine of a sports car, classic muscle car, or pickup truck. Rather than conform to prevailing representations, these women reconstruct and reimagine what the “woman driver” could be.

This project examines three alternative constructions of the woman driver to reveal the limitations of current representations as well as to suggest infinite new possibilities for women behind the wheel. Focusing on women who drive “chick” cars (e.g. MINI Cooper, VW New Beetle, and Mazda Miata), classic muscle cars (e.g. 1964-73 Dodge Charger, Pontiac GTO, and Plymouth Roadrunner), and full and mid-size pickup trucks, this investigation considers how women challenge historical and societal directives in order to create a legitimate and empowering place for themselves as drivers in the hegemonic masculine climate of American car culture. Cultural constructions of the woman driver have been and continue to be dependent on prevailing notions of gendered vehicle choice, car use, and driving behavior. Thus this project not only examines the origins of dominant constructions of the woman driver, but also suggests how and why particular representations are reinforced and maintained. It questions the reliability

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4 In “‘Woman’s Place’ in American Car Culture,” Charles Sanford defines car culture as “the cluster of beliefs, attitudes, symbols, values, behaviors, and institutions which have grown up around the manufacture and use of automobiles” (138).
of prevailing representations by considering the existence of alternative woman driver constructions. Using the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks as three representative populations, this research asks the following questions: by what means do women challenge popular conceptions of the woman driver; how does participation in these automotive subcultures alter the meanings women ascribe to cars; how does ownership of a particular automobile contribute to women’s subjectivity and identity formation; how do women’s performances in these distinct automotive contexts disrupt, reinforce, negotiate, and trouble gendered expectations regarding women’s automotive practices; what does the existence of alternative woman driver constructions reveal about the woman behind the wheel. Not only does this analysis question the authenticity of pervasive woman driver representations, but it also demonstrates how populations of driving women have successfully reconfigured and reclaimed the “woman driver” category to make it their own.

Literature Review

In his 1983 review of the critical automotive literature, American studies scholar Charles Sanford remarked, “women are conspicuously absent where they should be most present” (137). In the 30 years since Sanford’s astute observation, there has been a small, but significant, incorporation of the woman driver into scholarship. The primary areas of investigation focus on the woman driver as a historical actor, a stereotype, a fictional representation, and a subject of transportation and mobility studies. A brief summary of this literature not only establishes the woman driver as a worthy subject of investigation, but also provides an important cultural and historical backdrop for this ethnographic project.

The Woman Driver as Historical Actor

In her groundbreaking work on the Industrial Revolution in the home, Ruth Schwartz
Cowan cites the automobile as the “domestic technology” that not only transformed the nature of housework, but that also firmly secured the role of the woman driver as the “family chauffeur” and provider of household services. Yet as Cowan argues, rather than reduce labor by making tasks easier, the automobile actually increased middle-class women’s workload by making them responsible for the household chores once assumed by paid and unpaid servants. And although the automobile – when a plaything of the idle rich – was considered a vehicle of independence, its new function as a domestic technology tied women even closer to home. As Cowan writes, to the American woman of the middle classes, “the automobile had become the vehicle through which she did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could most often be found” (“More” 85). Cowan was the first scholar to suggest that the configuration of the automobile as an essential household technology was instrumental in the construction of the woman driver as caretaker and consumer.

Virginia Scharff, in the seminal *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*, delves into early automotive history to uncover strategies employed by automakers and marketers to shape women’s automobile use. When it became clear that the woman driver had rejected the electric car in favor of the gasoline automobile – which offered more power and range – auto industry decision makers were faced with a particular dilemma. While they recognized the lucrative possibilities of a female consumer base, they also feared an appeal to the woman driver would damage the longstanding association between cars and masculinity. The solution was to call upon the “vast, immutable, reassuring differences between men and women” as the means to divide automotive use by gender (115). Reconfiguring a particular type of automobile as a form of domestic technology, a tool that enabled women to fulfill their prescribed roles as wives, mothers, consumers, and caretakers, allowed automakers to appeal to
women without alienating men. This division of automobile use by gender – instigated by the auto industry soon after the gasoline-powered Model T rolled off Henry Ford’s assembly line in 1908 - continues to contribute to the construction of the woman driver as primarily caretaker and consumer well into the twenty-first century.

In her recovery of the woman driver from automotive history, Georgine Clarsen provides a counterpoint to Scharff as she shifts the focus from automakers to female motorists and their efforts to become recognized as competent drivers within early twentieth-century America. As first to automobility, male motorists set the policies of inclusion in the rapidly growing car culture. Recognizing that the affordability of the gasoline powered automobile had broadened the driving population to include the female motorist, a composite of the competent driver based on mechanical expertise rather than driving ability was created as a means to exclude women behind the wheel. Clarsen uncovers the voices of early women motorists and examines the myriad of ways they countered the judgments that “so ungenerously classified and surveilled them as bad drivers, inept mechanics, and timid travelers” (“Dust” 3). Yet rather than succumb to negative characterization, women motorists used the hostile climate in which they found themselves as the basis for a “collective identity from which to contest their exclusion” (“Dust” 2). In Eat My Dust, Clarsen not only examines how the portrayal of early female motorists as technologically inept contributed to the woman driver stereotype, but also how women challenged such portrayals in an attempt to establish themselves as competent drivers on their own terms.

Social historian Kathleen Franz dispels the notion of the woman driver as mechanically inept by drawing on accounts of early female motorists involved in the practice of “tinkering.” During the early days of automobility, car owners of both genders actively reinvented and repurposed automobiles for their own use. Women, who recognized their credibility as drivers
was often based on mechanical ability, often became capable and enthusiastic “tinkerers” as a means to dispel notions of female automotive ineptitude. Mechanical skill, unlike physical strength, offered a level playing field on which women could claim equality with men. While the notion of women as technologically capable was eventually displaced by the reassertion of female domesticity in the years following the First World War, Kranz’s investigation into the tinkering phenomenon demonstrates how women’s abilities as automobile owners and drivers have been continually questioned and challenged as a way to control women’s automobile use and to establish technological expertise, mechanical ingenuity, and driving skill as the province of men. Like Clarsen, Kranz suggests that the cultural construction of the woman driver as passive, inept, and dependent on men was a conscious effort to conceal the myriad of meanings women ascribe to cars as well as to perpetuate the negative woman driver stereotype.

Margaret Walsh – in a series of research projects - draws upon available resources such as auto industry promotional material, newspaper clippings, and print advertisements to construct a composite of the woman driver over time. Of particular interest to this project are two articles – “Home at the Wheel?” and “Gender and Automobility” - that individually and collectively address how the auto industry influenced and profited from women’s return to domesticity in the post World War II era. As Walsh writes, in the decades following the Second World War, “women’s place was still culturally defined as being in the home as dependent wives and mothers” (“Automobility” 304). While automakers considered women subordinate, they still wanted to expand their business. The post war imperative that women return to domesticity provided automakers with the opportunity to do just that. Marketing the “family car” as crucial to the fulfillment of women’s position as modern wife and mother not only became an effective advertising tool, but also reinforced traditional gender roles. Even as women returned to the
workforce in record numbers during the 1970s, “car makers were slow to recognize changes in women’s position in the American economy and society” (“Automobility” 301). As Walsh’s historical research demonstrates, despite vast changes in women’s lives over the past century, automakers continue to tie women’s automobile use with domesticity.

In Republic of Drivers, cultural studies scholar Cotten Seiler argues that during two particular periods of American history automobility performed a “crucial restorative role” to existing arrangements of power (3). Automobility was constructed as a means of compensation for the loss of individual identity and masculinity brought on by Taylorism in the post industrial era; in the decade following World War II, it served to reassert a “heroic, archaic, and emphatically masculine individualism” to counter 1950s anxieties about the feminization of American culture (72). During each of these eras in which masculinity was considered endangered, patriarchal social formations discounted women’s driving ability - through the proliferation of negative stereotypes – as a means to discourage them from driving. When women drivers challenged such representations, linking women’s auto use with domesticity became a way to “shape” women’s automobility while retaining automotive mastery, self-expression, and authority as exclusive to the male driver. The masculinization of automobility was achieved not only by emphasizing particular traits considered inherent in the male driver, but also by negating those of women behind the wheel. The woman driver stereotype, Seiler writes, “forcefully asserted gender as a prime indicator of driving aptitude” (85).

As social historians and scholars of cultural studies, Cowan, Schwartz, Clarsen, Franz, Walsh, and Seiler effectively recover the origins of the woman driver stereotype – and its many

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5 Taylorism was the scientific management theory developed by Frederick Taylor over the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As James M. Rubenstein notes in Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the U.S. Automotive Industry, Taylorism was developed to replace the craft system of production with unskilled labor. Breaking down the manufacture of a product into simple, repeatable tasks eliminated the need for skilled artisans – i.e. iron molders, machinists, and body builders – and took control out of the hands of workers.
incarnations - from automotive history. This recovery by multiple scholars provides significant evidence of the ubiquity of negative representations of the woman driver, especially during two particular periods of American automotive history. This scholarship also suggests that, despite efforts to denigrate women’s driving behavior and to shape women’s automobile use in a gendered way, female motorists repeatedly engaged in automobility on their own terms. Whether it was refusal to drive the slower, less powerful electric vehicles, participation in “unladylike” acts such as cross country tours or auto racing, or simply demanding cars of their own for work or pleasure, there were many women – invisible in mainstream automotive history – who rejected pervasive stereotypes and created alternative identities as autonomous drivers.

This project recognizes the pervasiveness of past and present woman driver stereotypes, and while it acknowledges a great number of women relate to cars primarily as functional tools of family or suburban living, it argues there are other manifestations of the woman driver worthy of consideration. The alternative constructions of the woman driver examined in this project illustrate that just as all women do not identify primarily as caretakers, not all women drivers get behind the wheel solely to fulfill domestic functions. The automotive narratives of three populations of female motorists presented here offer real life examples of how dominant woman driver constructions can be challenged through participation in alternative driving cultures. This project calls upon the scholarship of Cowan, Scharff, Clarsen, Franz, Walsh, and Seiler to establish the historical and cultural reality of the woman driver stereotype, and offers the testimonies of real woman drivers to consider new and alternative ways of thinking about women’s automobile use, driving behavior, and the relationship between women and cars.

The Woman Driver as Cultural Stereotype

The woman driver stereotype – its origins and multiple manifestations – has been a
popular topic of investigation among media and popular culture scholars. In his influential essay “Women Drivers!” Michael Berger asserts that the stereotypes applied to female motorists during the early part of the twentieth century, while intending to be humorous, emerged for “very serious social reasons” (257). When the automobile ceased being an upper class plaything and car ownership came within the financial means of the majority of Americans, there was a significant concern among “defenders of the status quo” over the effect of the automobile on the lives and behavior of the growing number of female motorists. This anxiety created a need to limit women’s driving as well as the social changes many feared would accompany it. This was attempted through the creation and propagation of stereotypes surrounding women’s driving behavior and automobile use. While the stereotypes were eventually proven to be unfounded, as studies soon revealed women were as good as, if not better, drivers than men (262), one only has to Google “woman driver” to discover that stereotypes regarding women as nervous, distracted, and inept drivers stubbornly remain.

In *Women and the Machine*, Julie Wosk addresses the trajectory of the woman driver stereotype as part of her investigation of the contradictory ways women’s interactions with machines have been defined in Western popular culture. As Wosk asserts, the world of machines had historically belonged to men; consequently, women’s growing involvement with technology was considered both an intrusion onto “male turf” as well as an indication of women’s abandonment of prescribed gender roles. Negative stereotypes of woman drivers – rendered in cartoons, illustrations, postcards, photographs, and advertisements – were widely circulated in an effort to curb women’s mobility as well as to reestablish the association of technological superiority with the male driver. While advertisers, magazine illustrators, and photographers were complicit in this endeavor, there were, Wosk argues, female photographers and artists “who
tried to redefine the terms, revisiting representational conventions and sometimes casting them anew” (148). This suggests that, despite the ubiquity of negative imagery, women challenged prevailing stereotypes through the construction of alternative driver identities. Although many adverse assumptions regarding women’s car use continue to this day, alternative constructions of the woman driver can work to disclose the speciousness of pervasive stereotypes.

In the early years of the motor age, the speed and freedom promised by cars were viewed as dangerous for women, “invoking images of wantonness and sexual liberation” (Domosh and Seager 123). Wosk, as well as Jennifer Berkley and Laura Behling, examine how perceptions of the woman driver as promiscuous and sexually uninhibited have influenced how the woman driver is represented in the media and popular culture. In “Women at the Motor Wheel,” Berkley aligns the rise in popularity of the automobile with that of the flapper. The flapper, Berkley argues, as a single, economically independent, and sexually free young woman with a driver’s license, represented a threat to the social order. In an attempt to suppress her influence, she was most often characterized – in automotive advertising and popular culture - as “silly, vacuous, giddy, and above all, faddish” (23). Behling, in “Marketing Ideal Womanhood, 1915-1934,” analyzes how automakers ignored women’s desire for independence – financial and sexual – by crafting advertising in which her traditionally feminine sex and gender expectations were “carefully contained” (28). While the woman as decorative object or sexual lure has been a constant in advertising directed toward men, Wosk notes how, during the 1960s sexual revolution era, women drivers were often positioned provocatively as a means to attract both the male and female consumer. In “Six and the Single Girl,” an ad for the Ford Mustang, a young woman leans suggestively over a “brute of an engine,” implying, writes Wosk, that the automobile is a “love object for women” (145). As this literature suggests, women who sought
the freedom and power offered by automobility were often stereotyped as uninhibited and promiscuous; consequently, attempts were made to reconfigure the woman driver within acceptable societal norms.

Virginia Scharff, Catharina Landström asserts, made us aware that it “takes work to construct a technology as symbolically gendered” (32). Moving into the twenty-first century, Landström investigates how in popular motoring magazines, gendered imagery is often called upon to organize men and women very differently in relationship to cars. Only male drivers, these publications suggest, are capable of experiencing the “economy of pleasure” associated with the driving experience. In order to maintain this association with the male driver, popular car magazines construct the woman driver as incapable of experiencing gratification behind the wheel. As Landström argues, the gendered imagery that associates the pleasure of driving solely with the male driver “obscures women’s actual relationship with cars” (49). In “A Gendered Economy of Pleasure,” Landström not only draws attention to how and why auto manufacturers distance themselves from the woman driver, but also uses the Volvo YCC project – in which an automotive prototype was designed and marketed by an all female automotive team - as an example of how the “economy of pleasure” can be reconfigured to create a legitimate relationship with cars that values, rather than disparages, the identity of “woman driver.”

In the 1987 article “The Liberated Lady Driver,” Beth Kraig considers a series of Mercury commercials as a “positive new step” in the popular image of the woman driver in the post-feminist era. She compares the bold, capable, and independent Mercury woman of the 1987 campaign to past representations that linked women’s automotive use to domesticity. The Mercury campaign, Kraig notes, was an attempt to disrupt common conceptions of the woman driver by imbuing the female motorist with qualities – confidence, power, and aggressiveness –
associated with the man behind the wheel. In her 2007 revisit of the original article, Kraig asserts that, rather than simply reconstruct the woman driver in a masculine image, it is time to abolish the gender dualism of automotive categories in favor of the “Automotive Human, a gender-inclusive model of the thoughtful and skillful driver” (299). While these articles were written twenty years apart, Kraig remains optimistic throughout in the possibility of new constructions of the woman driver. However, while she cites attempts by Mercury as a good start in this direction, she concedes that such changes will most likely evolve slowly as women “choose to take or accept greater individual responsibility for defining their places in society” (398).

As these scholars argue, stereotypes of the woman driver in popular culture originated as a means to contain women’s automobility. Whether in the form of a “joke” or an inference to women’s bad behavior, these stereotypes have been circulated, reinvented, and perpetuated over the past century. While based on fiction rather than fact, they continue to negatively define the woman driver. The pervasiveness of these images has effectively obliterated recognition of alternative constructions of the woman driver. Attempts to negate disparaging imagery have, for the most part, failed, as patriarchal structures are maintained when the woman driver is portrayed in a limiting way. Perhaps Kraig is correct when she suggests changes will not occur in the public imagination until women take the responsibility to define themselves as drivers rather than allow automakers to decide what cars women should drive and to what purpose such driving should be directed. This project offers the voices of real women - whose relationships to cars do not conform to dominant constructions of the woman driver - as a means to that end.

The Woman Driver as Representation

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have uncovered alternative constructions of the woman driver in literature and film that challenge cultural stereotypes. Literary scholar Marie
Farr notes how female authors often appropriate male symbols when writing about women’s relationship to the automobile. While male writers are likely to identify the automobile with male sexuality, power, and control, female authors often invert male images so that power as control transforms itself into the power of being one’s own person. Focusing primarily on feminist fiction of the 1970s and 80s, Farr suggests that as women writers explored the inequitable treatment of women in American society, they chose women’s driving as a metaphor for living. Thus to the woman driver, “learning to successfully control the automobile means learning to control themselves, and therefore survive” (163). The woman driver in feminist era women’s fiction, Farr suggests, represents the possibility of escape from male control and the acquisition of autonomy and independence. Taking the wheel of the car provides the woman driver with the opportunity to take control of her life. Through the appropriation, adaption, and inversion of male images associated with the automobile, American women writers, Farr asserts, have constructed the woman driver as empowered, independent, autonomous, and in control.

Deborah Clarke argues that women’s fiction provides an important location from which to explore women’s participation in automobile culture as well as “the gradual shifts in how gender, technology, agency, autonomy, and domesticity have been articulated throughout the past hundred years” (“Driving” 195). In her examination of contemporary women’s fiction, Clarke focuses primarily on the road trip, a genre traditionally associated with the male driver. When crafted into feminist texts, the road trip takes on new meanings, as the female protagonist, unlike her male counterpart, must continually negotiate the possibilities of freedom, dangers associated with women’s mobility, and the constraints of domesticity. As Clarke suggests, in order to escape the physical confines of the home, the woman driver must often reconfigure the home as mobile; the automobile becomes a space from which women can “hit the road in a room
of their own” (“Trips” 123). Writers of women’s fiction recognize the woman driver can never completely escape the constraints of domesticity; however, this does not prohibit her from exercising a degree of agency. As Clarke suggests, through a feminist appropriation of the road trip genre, writers of women’s fiction can “open up the space for women with cars to follow new paths that can re-shape gender and domesticity without necessarily denying them” (“Trips” 124).

Jack Kerouac’s seminal 1951 novel *On the Road* firmly established the road trip narrative as a masculine genre. In *Fast Cars and Bad Girls*, Deborah Paes de Barros argues that women who occupy the same road also have stories to tell. Through an analysis of women’s road trip literature, Paes de Barros attempts to create a space for female nomadic narratives outside and beyond the spaces that have been “mapped, controlled and designed by men” (62). Paes de Barros considers the woman driver who traverses these roads as a nomadic subject and transgressor, traveling from the confines of domesticity into spaces “outside compliance” (14). Like the nomad, the woman driver moves only for the purpose of moving; in doing so, she creates a narrative that “resists the linear mobility of the conventional road” (7). The women drivers in the road trip narratives offer the possibility of transgressing boundaries; they tell us, “the only possible reaction to oppression is subversion” (188). The writers of these texts acknowledge that women remain bound to domesticity; however, taking to the road opens up the possibility of outside spaces in which the woman driver can temporarily resist the claim of patriarchy and experience an empowerment of self through exaltation, power, and joy.

In her examination of the literary road trip genre in two significant works, Alexandra Ganser calls upon a cultural geography approach to consider the open road as a “textual space in which powerful regimes of gender, cultural, and social differences are destabilized” (“Roads” 14). Women’s driving has been acknowledged primarily as practiced within the domestic sphere.
In the women’s road trip narrative, these gendered spatial boundaries are challenged when women drive away from home and merge onto the masculinized territory of the open road. However, as the female protagonists of these stories soon realize, mobility does not always equate with freedom and the open road often presents the woman driver with danger zones “dominated by an androcentric logic in which women’s physical and emotional well being is apparently always at perilous stake” (“Asphalt” 160). Transgressing the gendered boundaries of private to public has always been accompanied with a certain amount of risk; however, the women who drive these stories develop a myriad of strategies to escape spatial confinement, redefine themselves as drivers, and democratize the road. The automobile becomes the vehicle from which they are able to contest women’s access to public space and to alter the meaning of woman driver.

Scholars have also noted the presence of alternative constructions of the woman driver in motion pictures. In “Women in the Driver’s Seat,” Jennifer Parchesky argues that representations of the female motorist in early women’s films reflect the “auto-eroticism” of women’s automobility. As Parchesky writes, in motion pictures such as the 1914 release Mabel at the Wheel, the woman driver not only relays professional competence, but also “uninhibited desire and active resistance to patriarchal constraints” (176). These early women’s films, Parchesky suggests, articulate and sustain a “political unconscious” of first-wave feminism (175). In The Road Story and the Rebel, Katie Mills suggests the woman driver in film has evolved from a “catalytic converter” – the force that propels the men in the film into action – into a catalyst for social change. Mills focuses primarily on the 1991 release of Thelma and Louise, significant as the first major film in which women were not passengers, but drivers responsible for moving the story. As Mills writes, “Thelma and Louise brought national attention to female automobility as
the desire for autonomy from patriarchal structure and rebellion against male privilege” (194).

The woman drivers in this film – who succumb to a violent death rather than return to oppressive lives under patriarchy – are activists for social change. By exposing the violence women experience in the home and on the road, they embolden women to make changes to the world in which they live so that others will not be compelled to escape it.

The woman driver in literature and film offers the possibility of transgression, resistance, and escape. Dominant constructions of the woman driver have traditionally relied upon separate sphere ideology⁶ that irrevocably links her to the home. This historical and cultural association with domesticity has effectively shaped women’s driving behavior and has constrained women’s automobile use. It has successfully maintained public spaces as male domains and has impeded women’s entrance into such locations. Literary and film scholars Clarke, Farr, Ganser, Mills, Parchesky, and Paes de Barros call upon representations of the woman driver in fiction and film not only to expose the gender inequities in automobile culture, but also to demonstrate how separate sphere ideology is still relied upon to limit women’s mobility in multiple locations. Resistance, the scholars argue, provides the opportunity for women behind the wheel to alter the nature of these spaces and in the process, empower themselves as women and drivers. The representations of woman drivers presented by these scholars are varied; however, the positioning of each female protagonist as transgressive in some manner suggests the possibility of alternative constructions of the woman driver. While a fictional character certainly has more

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⁶ Separate sphere ideology has its roots in industrialization, a period that witnessed the end of colonial home life in which the nuclear family was a unit of production. As Gerstel and Gross write, “industrial capitalism gradually fractured job site and household into separate spheres” (91). In this division, the private sphere of home and domesticity became the responsibility of women, whereas the public sphere of work and business was considered the province of men. Historically, the ideology of separate spheres has been called upon to regulate women’s pursuits in the public sphere. This, of course, includes women’s participation in automobility. As Scharff writes, “Putting wheels on woman’s sphere meant contesting gender stereotypes, muddying the distinction between public and private, redesigning the landscape, decentralizing the American city, and creating new forms of control and vulnerability for American women” (“Wheel” 170).
opportunity to challenge gender norms in the home and on the road than her real life counterpart, the fact that so many women writers have produced female protagonists driven to escape domesticity through automobility, or to create new constructions of home on the road, is telling. It suggests the possibility of alternative ways of considering women’s automobile use and it reveals women’s complicated relationship to the automobile that cannot be defined by reliance on popular stereotypes or dominant constructions of the woman driver.

*The Woman Driver as a Subject of Transportation Studies*

Gender is a relatively recent focus of inquiry in the field of transportation studies. Margaret Walsh was instrumental in the incorporation of the woman driver into a subject area historically developed by men for a male audience. As Walsh asserts in “Gendering Transport History,” “gender as a category of analysis moves more towards reality by recognizing that the different circumstances of the sexes make women and men feel and identify with events and views in dissimilar ways” (2). Transportation research, Walsh argues, has traditionally centered on automotive production. The incorporation of gender into transport studies shifts the focus from vehicle production to consumption. Women’s consumption of automobiles has had a significant effect on the automotive industry. Automakers, while belittling women’s ability as drivers, have always acknowledged women’s significant influence on men’s automotive purchases.7 Shifting the focus from a male centric concentration on vehicle production to the role of the woman driver in automotive consumption provides a more complete picture in the field of transportation research. As Walsh suggests, men and women have different relationships to the automobile; consequently, the incorporation of the woman driver into transit studies provides new and important insights into gendered driving behavior and automobile use.

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7 Walsh, Scharff, and Judy DeVere of AskPatty.com note that although historically, women’s lack of economic independence has prevented them from having cars of their own, they have frequently exercised significant influence on the purchase of a family automobile.
In his influential study of gendered travel patterns, Martin Wachs argues that differences in men and women’s transportation modes are not based in physical characteristics, but rather are “rooted in society’s expectation that each sex will fulfill distinct economic and social roles” (“Gap” 1). In the first 100 years of automobility, women’s travel patterns differed considerably and consistently from those of men; in the twenty-first century, those distinctions remain remarkably persistent. As Wachs asserts, American urban areas were deliberately designed to place men and women in separate spheres, which was reflected in automobile use. Women’s entry into the work force was expected to significantly change these gendered travel patterns. However, despite increased labor participation, women remain primarily responsible for children and the household. As Wachs contends, this has resulted in women choosing employment closer to home rather than any discernible change in women’s gendered travel patterns. As long as the cultural stereotyping of gender roles is persistent, Wachs argues, “women’s travel patterns will continue to differ substantially from those of men” (“Spheres” 100). In his large body of work on this topic, Wachs focuses on the woman driver’s automobile use as an important consideration in city planning and daily urban life studies.

Robin Law – who reflects upon a wide range of transport studies in “Beyond Women and Transport” - argues for a more comprehensive consideration of the gendered patterns of daily mobility in transportation and geography research. As Law attests, of all everyday technology, transport technology has “the most deep-seated and wide-ranging connection to gender distinctions” (579). While social historians such as Scharff have reflected on the link between consumer products such as cars and gender identity in early automotive history, considerations of gender’s impact on contemporary automotive use are lacking in current scholarship. What is required, Law asserts, is a focus not only on gendered travel patterns, but also on the meanings
imbedded in gendered travel practices. There needs to be a greater understanding of how and why men and women experience automobility differently, how consumer products are linked to gender identity, and how gendered transit practices reinforce, maintain, or subvert cultural gender codes. Law suggests that the incorporation of new approaches associated with the “cultural turn” - gender division of labor and activities, gendered access to resources, gendered subject identities, gender as a symbolic code, and gendered built environment – will produce research more attuned to the driving behavior and automobile use of the woman driver.

As they argue for the importance of gender in transit studies, these representative projects bring new attention to the driving behavior and automobile use of the woman driver. Shifting the focus from quantitative research on gendered travel patterns to qualitative analyses of the gendered meanings ascribed to automotive practices contributes to an improved understanding of women’s relationship to the automobile as it works to dispel cultural stereotypes of the woman driver. However, while these studies advance the woman driver as an important subject of scholarship, their primary focus is on women’s driving practices rather than relationships between women and cars. This project, which relies upon the automotive narratives of female participants in American car culture, provides the human element lacking in transit scholarship. It enriches existing transit studies data through the incorporation of women’s real life experiences in a variety of automobiles and automotive locations.

While existing scholarship provides a number of avenues in which to consider the woman driver, there is a dearth of real women’s voices. Relying primarily on historical sources, fictional representations, popular culture, and transit studies, the current body of research is

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8 The few qualitative studies which incorporate the woman driver were conducted outside of the U.S. and include “Sense and Sensibility,” an examination of the personal meanings older Swedish women attach to driving by Anu Siren and Liisa Hakamies-Blomqvist, Sarah Redshaw’s ongoing work on Australian youth driving cultures, and Karen Lumsden’s ethnographic project focusing on girls’ participation in the male-dominated ‘boy racer’ culture in Aberdeen, Scotland.
missing the everyday experiences and perspectives of women behind the wheel. I attempted to address this absence in previous projects conducted over the past few years. My master’s thesis - “Women and Car Culture in Cyberspace” – examines how participation in Internet car groups provides a diverse population of women the opportunity and knowledge to become more accomplished and enthusiastic car owners and drivers. In “Evolution of the Chick Car,” I focus on a group of woman drivers who have appropriated a class of small, quick, and sporty vehicles originally designed for the male driver and claimed it for their own use. “Women with Muscle” is centered on conservative aging baby boomer women in Southeastern Michigan who call upon the classic muscle car as a means to strengthen family ties and form community with fellow car enthusiasts. This current project builds on my past work as it revisits female driving populations and investigates new groups who have constructed alternative woman driver identities. It adds to the current literature by suggesting that there are populations of women who have been, and continue to be, actively and passionately engaged in the creation of new driver categories as well as the construction of alternative meanings for the automobile and the driving experience.

Framing the Woman Driver

Judy Wajcman, in the groundbreaking *Feminism Confronts Technology*, challenges the commonplace assumption that technology is gender neutral. As Wajcman claims, “It is impossible to divorce the gender relations which are expressed in, and shape technologies from, the wider social structures that create and maintain them” (25). In technologies such as the automobile, Wajcman argues, dominant gender ideologies have been as influential in product development and design as considerations of technical efficiency. Auto manufacturers and marketers have traditionally ascribed particular meanings to vehicles in production and promotion in order to separate automotive consumption, use, and performance by gender. Such
divisions have been employed not only as a successful marketing strategy, but also as a means to reinforce and maintain prescribed gender norms in the home and on the road. Because gendered meanings are incorporated into the automobile in both production and consumption, men and women are not only expected to gravitate toward cars that affirm distinct gender identities, but to perform gender appropriately in practices around cars as well.

Cultural constructions of the “woman driver” rely upon the association of gender performance with women’s automobile consumption and use. The persistence of various woman driver stereotypes - dependent on longstanding assumptions regarding women’s vehicle preferences and driving behaviors - has been crucial to the maintenance of the gendered meanings ascribed to cars and the separation of men’s and women’s driving experiences in American car culture. The participants in this project call upon their own gender performances around cars to challenge common perceptions of the woman driver. These unconventional gender performances reflect the automotive choices the women make and the meanings ascribed to the cars they drive. Therefore, in order to gain insight into the alternative constructions of the woman driver presented by the owners of chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks, this project is framed by theories of material culture and technology, specifically Phillip Vannini’s concept of objectification and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. These combined theoretical perspectives provide an effective framework in which to consider how the application of new meanings to masculine technologies and the development of alternative gender performances behind the wheel can serve to alter, disrupt, and reinvent the “woman driver.”

Simply stated, material culture is “the world of things that people make and things that we purchase or possess” (A. Berger 16). The discipline of material culture studies has traditionally investigated what objects reveal about the societies in which they are found as well
as the impact such objects have had on these societies. As Jules Prown suggests, objects made or modified by man “reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who made, commissioned, purchased or used them and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged” (1). Technology scholars such as Judy Wajcman, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, and Phillip Vannini have incorporated elements of material culture theory into technology studies to illustrate how social practices and cultural beliefs are embedded not only in technological development, but also in technological choices. Nina Lerman, Arwen Mohun, and Ruth Oldenziel pay particular attention to the relationships between gender and technology, noting the central role of gender ideologies in human interactions with technology, as well as the crucial influence of technology “to the ways male and female identities are formed, gender structures defined, and gender ideologies constructed” (1). As is argued throughout this project, car manufacturers incorporate certain elements into vehicles that mark them as “women’s” cars; it is expected that women will choose these cars as a means to reinforce cultural gender roles. Vannini is interested in the interactions between technological objects and subjects, particularly the ways in which “humans shape, and are shaped by, the materiality of life” (2). Through processes of “objectification,” Vannini argues, material objects become concrete embodiments of things other than themselves. In the women-car relationships examined in this project, the automobile is often transformed into something other than what the manufacturer originally intended. It is not simply a means of transportation, nor is it a way to display or reinforce a prescribed feminine identity. Rather, women’s use of a particular vehicle changes how it will be perceived in car culture, and in turn, alters the way a woman views herself as a driver. Thus objectification – a wholly reciprocal process in which “object and subject are indelibly conjoined” (16) – provides a fitting framework from which to consider women’s relationship to
the automobile in a variety of contexts; i.e. the social scripts surrounding women’s automobile consumption and use; the ideologies and gender politics that regulate or influence women’s engagement in various car cultures; and the possibilities for negotiation or reconfiguration as women drivers through the assumption of new car uses and meanings.

Vannini suggests that performance-centered approaches to material culture can emphasize the value of studying the interaction of subject and object. People and things perform together. As Vannini writes, “We can think of material objects not as givens or essences, but in light of how they perform and what they can perform (i.e. the scripts they are endowed with and enact)” (77). Women driver stereotypes originated as a means to constrain women’s automobility through disparagement of women’s gender performance behind the wheel. While Vannini’s concept of objectification serves to underscore how women shape, and are shaped by, the automobile, Butler’s theory of gender performativity is useful in understanding the link between gender and the devaluation of women’s driving ability, as well as to consider how alternative gender performances have the potential to reimagine what it means to be a woman driver.

Butler argues that gender is not fixed, but is constructed through social interactions. Certain types of acts, Butler asserts, are interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity. These acts 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 other discursive means” (“Trouble” 173). Gender identity is maintained through the repetition of social acts that cast particular pursuits as masculine or feminine, a process of “doing gender” originally introduced by Candace West and Don Zimmerman and incorporated by Butler into the theory of “performativity.” The continued repetition of gender acts leads to their normalization; gender is no longer a choice, but a social expectation. Gender performativity, Butler writes, “presupposes
that norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us” (“Precarity” xi). In terms of women’s automobility, women’s core gender identity is assumed to influence car choice, vehicle use, and driving performance. Women, as family caretakers, are “naturally” drawn to safe, sturdy, and practical vehicles; women’s automobile use is presumed to center on the car’s function as a domestic technology; the woman driver’s “normative” gender performance is expected to be purposeful, as well as cautious, careful, and passive. Performativity is relational; i.e. what is normative in women is regarded as deviant in men, and inversely, car use and driving behavior typically encouraged in men is considered inappropriate for women. Therefore it is expected that the man behind the wheel will choose cars that exhibit power, control, status, and sexual prowess; will call upon the automobile for both work and amusement; and will engage in a gender performance that demonstrates skill, daring, and pleasure. As Sarah Redshaw – in her research focused on the social and cultural meanings of the car - notes, “authentic” male drivers “cherish the experience of speed and controlling it, and challenge their driving skill on demanding roads” (“Company” 18).

The theory of gender performativity offers insight into the origins of the dominant construction of the woman driver, its persistence into the twenty-first century, as well as its continued importance to automakers and advertisers. Through the manufacture and marketing of cars with particular attributes and meanings, automakers have and continue to encourage car purchases, car uses, and driving performances that reinforce traditional gender roles as a means to distance women’s automobility from that of men. The original stereotype, which ridiculed women’s technological naiveté, timidity, passivity, and overly cautious driving habits, associated
particular driving performances with the woman behind the wheel. The current stereotype, which links the woman driver to motherhood, not only encourages very specific and limited automobile use, but endorses rather than disparages women’s safe, careful, and guarded driving behavior. The persistence of these stereotypes over the past century, repeated, revised, and remarketed over and over again, have influenced women’s driving expectations and performance. Women are both conditioned and expected to choose vehicles and use them in ways that reflect prescribed gender roles.

The theory of performativity also draws attention to how gendered driving – as personified by the “woman driver” - has been constructed as a way to devalue women’s driving experience and to reinforce the association of superior driving skill and automotive expertise with the man behind the wheel. In a discussion of hegemonic masculinity, R.W. Connell argues, “men benefit from the subordination of women” (185); the woman driver stereotype has been instrumental in maintaining this inequitable relationship within American car culture. While Vannini’s concept of objectification provides a lens through which to examine the inequalities and hierarchal arrangements embedded in masculine technologies such as the automobile, performativity allows us to consider how essentialized versions of the woman driver promoted by the auto industry as natural and normal – exacerbated by the ubiquitous woman driver stereotype - deny complexity and plurality of meaning to women behind the wheel.

Butler’s theory of performativity also has the ability to unsettle the stabilizing gender categories that work to regulate the woman driver. It offers possibilities for resistance and reinvention as it locates spaces for agency and subject construction. As Butler asserts, performativity allows for the examination of how “gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such
acts” (“Performative Acts” 521). Women have long been expected to drive particular cars in prescribed ways for specific reasons. When they transport children to school, sporting events, or piano lessons in a minivan, or when they load five bags of groceries in a hatchback or small SUV, they are performing gender as drivers in scripted and culturally approved ways. Many of the women who participated in this project owned a minivan or crossover at some point in their lives. They acknowledged the cultural scripts that accompany the “woman’s car” as they dutifully, if not begrudgingly, fulfilled them. However, they also recognized that there are automotive locations in which such engrained cultural scripts can be modified, challenged, and disrupted. Thus maneuvering a chick car along twisty mountain roads, gunning the engine of a 1966 Dodge Charger, or off-roading with a superbody pickup truck provided these women with the opportunity to redefine what gendered driving is and how women can perform behind the wheel. The theory of performativity offers a framework from which to consider how three groups of women reconfigure the woman driver category to incorporate new meanings, car uses, and gender performances. Rather than refute the notion of gendered driving, the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks expand the woman driver category to include themselves in it. They do not necessarily consider these alternative driving performances as masculine, nor do they blindly follow gendered driving scripts. They have taken it upon themselves to reframe gendered driving and provide examples of the many ways it may be performed. In doing so, they demonstrate how women’s gender performance behind the wheel has the potential to invent new constructions of the woman driver.

Butler introduced the concept of “gender trouble” to suggest how individuals can reveal the artificiality of essential gender categories through performance. As they actively participate in alternative automotive cultures, the women in this project “trouble” gender by confronting,
disrupting, expanding, and reimagining the cultural scripts historically associated with the woman driver. Vannini also recognizes the possibilities of contesting the regimes and ideologies that influence and regulate women’s car use. As he notes, engagement with a particular technology can either reinforce power and status differentials, or provide the opportunity to contest and negotiate the “hegemonies of tasks” embedded within it (15). The women who participated in this project have rejected the masculine meanings originally ascribed to chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks and replaced them with meanings of their own making. As Sarah Redshaw asserts, “cars mean different things to different people and can be used in a myriad of ways not necessarily foreseen by manufacturers” (“Company” 13). This convergence on the possibility of resistance – through alternative gender performances as drivers and the application of alternative meanings to a historically masculine technology – suggests that a theoretical framework that borrows from Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Vannini’s notion of objectification can illuminate how dominant constructions of the woman driver may be challenged. The theory of performativity provides the opportunity to consider how the automobile influences gender performance; objectification draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between the automobile as a technological object and the woman driver as subject. These combined theoretical perspectives provide an effective framework from which to consider how the applications of new meanings to automobiles and the ensuing development of alternative gender performances around cars allow three populations of driving women to reimagine themselves as woman drivers and gain agency from it.

Methodology

This project focuses on women who participate in three distinct automotive cultures. Not all of the women take part in car culture with the same intensity or frequency, and not all cultures
– i.e. chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck - require the same personal investment from members. Although multiple ethnographic methods were incorporated into this project, interviewing proved to be the most accessible, productive, inclusive, and rewarding. Thus the interview became the project’s primary ethnographic method; it was supplemented by onsite and online observation of the chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck cultures, as well as analyses of auto related artifacts and photographs contributed by the participants.

Interviews

For this project, I recruited participants in a number of ways. For the chick car drivers, my primary method was through the various online car group sites and Facebook pages that cater to specific automobile owners. I contacted the “gatekeepers,” i.e. administrators, of each of these sites and requested permission to solicit participation from car group members. In these interactions I endeavored to present myself as sincere, credible, and professional as possible. I introduced myself as a car enthusiast and graduate scholar interested in the connection between women and particular vehicle categories. I used my university email address in all of my correspondence to address any potential apprehensiveness on the part of the prospective participants as well as to legitimate my motives and my status as a graduate student. While the majority of administrators willingly posted my request, a few of the male gatekeepers were hesitant to award me access. Despite the reluctance of a few administrators, I was overwhelmed by dozens of enthusiastic chick car owners eager to talk to me about their vehicles.

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9 An administrator on Miata.net replied, “I'm going to decline your request. We've been fighting the typical ‘chick car’ stereotype for years. I don't want to turn around and condone a study that requires that acknowledgement” (Fischman). An email from a Dodge Ram Forum moderator read, “I am contacting you to let you know that I had to delete your intro thread as we do not allow solicitation of our members. If we did we would be over run by requests from charities and fundraising events” (Shawn). The most outrageous response was from a (male) individual who not only claimed, “The car thing seems trite for a dissertation,” but also suggested, “the decline of Minivan sales would be a more relevant issue regarding women studies” (Brown).
The women who own classic muscle cars were recruited primarily at car events. Since vehicles displayed at these events have cards in the window that indicate the vehicle’s owner, I was able, for the most part, to ascertain which cars were owned by women. I approached the female owners, inquired about their cars, explained the project, and asked if they would have an interest in participation. Since those who show cars are often looking at other cars on the site and not stationed next to their vehicle, I left a prepared flyer to those owners I could not locate.

Because not all women drivers participate in car club events or online car groups, I also employed snowball sampling in the recruitment process. Snowball sampling involves identifying a small number of individuals who share particular characteristics and asking them for referrals. In this sampling strategy, a small sample has the potential to “snowball” from a few to many subjects. As Berg and Lune assert, snowball sampling is often an effective means to study difficult-to-reach populations (52). This method was particularly helpful in the recruitment of female pickup truck owners as there is not an established truck culture from which to draw participants.

Those who responded to inquiries posted on club discussion groups, websites, and Facebook pages, or through the snowball process, were emailed a Human Research Subject Board (HSRB) approved consent form (appendix B). Potential participants at car shows and other events were handed a consent form and a self addressed, stamped envelope in which to return it (appendix C). The form informed the participants of their own responsibilities and those of the researcher. To assure confidentiality, I notified the subjects that real names would not be used in the final document. I also assured participants that any photos used in the final project

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10 If the name on the card was “gender neutral,” I attempted to find out whether the owner was female by asking other exhibitors in the area, or by returning to the car later in the day.
would not contain their image, and that any identifying characteristics on the vehicles such as license plates would be obscured through the use of photo imaging software.

Since some individuals are comfortable talking while others prefer putting their thoughts down on paper, each of the participants was able to select the method of interview, either by phone, in person, or in a written survey. For those who chose to participate by phone or in person, I employed the semistandardized interview. As Berg and Lune note, unlike the standardized interview, which relies on a formally structured “schedule” of interview questions and focuses on collecting facts, the semistandardized interview, while somewhat structured, provides more freedom to digress, change directions, and to probe beyond standard answers (108). In the semistandardized interview, questions are often inspired and guided by participant responses, which can result in narratives that are richer and more nuanced. Since many of the women had fascinating and unique car stories that went beyond the scope of the prepared questions, this method provided the opportunity to get to know the women and their cars better. Those who requested a survey were emailed the questions in a word document, and were encouraged to take as much space as necessary within the document to respond. Unlike the face-to-face or phone interview, in which responses are immediate and somewhat reactionary, the written survey allows the participant to spend some time formulating the answers, which offers the possibility of responses that are both contemplative and reflective.

While the questions for the three targeted groups of women drivers varied based on vehicle particulars as well as the demographics of each driver base, I followed a general outline in the interview process (appendix D). The first part of the interview consisted of procuring general information about the car and driver. I requested the driver’s personal information, which included age, race, income, sexual orientation, residence, marital status, education, occupation,
and political ideology. I then asked the participant to provide a personal car history; i.e. a short chronology of cars driven and owned. I also requested specific information on the vehicle in discussion, including the make, model, year of production, color, engine, and options. The second section asked participants to reflect on particular aspects of car ownership. They were requested to elaborate on how the car is used – i.e. as transportation, for work-related tasks, for leisure pursuits or hobbies, as a daily driver, for special car themed events – the car’s history, the reasons for choosing a particular vehicle, the experience of driving it, the meanings ascribed to it, the labels attached to it, and how owning a particular vehicle contributed to each woman’s subjectivity and identity formation. I also asked the participants to provide personal stories about the car; i.e. where it has taken them, what they have experienced in it, how owning it has affected their lives. The final section asked participants to reflect on membership in a car organization or participation on online or Facebook car groups. Because I was not able to immerse myself in all three automotive subcultures equally, I attempted to learn more about each culture through the interview process, asking questions to determine how each woman viewed her participation in car clubs in particular and car culture in general. Before beginning the interview process, I informed each participant that if she chose not to answer any question she could simply say “pass” and move on to the next.

On Site Observation

As the nation’s automotive capital, southeastern Michigan provides an abundance of car-themed activities in a concentrated geographical area in which to observe women’s participation in car culture and to talk to women about cars. There are hundreds of active car groups in Michigan and in the surrounding auto-centric areas of Indiana and Ohio that hold regular car-themed events in warm weather months and whose members convene on a regular basis to take
part in field trips, picnics, and club meetings. I also took advantage of out-of-town trips to search out female car owners at automotive events in other parts of the country. Owners of pickup trucks use their vehicles primarily as daily drivers, necessary tools for a particular hobby or recreational pursuit, for hauling trailers and campers, or for work in occupations such as construction; therefore, they are less likely to participate in car themed events. My on site observation, therefore, was limited primarily to gatherings of chick car and classic muscle owners. Owners of Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles often take part in neighborhood cruise-ins or longer group destination road trips along winding and challenging roads; classic Mustang, Charger, and Camaro owners spend the warm weather months parked at car shows or “cruising” urban thoroughfares that were popular sites of street racing back in the day.

During the summers of 2013 and 2014 I attended as many of these activities as possible to observe women as car owners, drivers, and members of car organizations. In these locations I examined women’s interaction with other car owners as well as with spectators. I was particularly interested in the influence of gender on participation; i.e. whether women congregated with other women or with men, had single or joint membership in car club organizations, whether or not they assumed traditional gendered roles in the car club environment, whether they attended car events alone or with a male or female partner, whether they participated primarily as drivers or passengers, and how they negotiated the traditionally masculine spaces of American car culture. I also paid close attention to the racial and class composition, sexual orientation, and age range of each group – to the extent that I could determine those characteristics - while attending various automotive events. While my observations generally corroborated my previous research – i.e. car cultures tend to attract distinctive populations – visiting the physical sites of women’s participation allowed me observe
how women interacted with members of the group with whom they identified, as well as those outside the dominant demographic. While on site, I asked for permission to take photographs of the women’s cars. I also encouraged those contacted online to forward favorite car photos.

**Online Observation**

In a previous project ("Car Groups") I discovered women drivers often participate or “lurk” on Internet car groups as a means to seek product information and technical advice, keep abreast of national and regional car events, and share automotive experiences with other car enthusiasts. These various online locations are open to new car owners, hardcore auto aficionados, as well as individuals who just want to talk about cars. While there are auto enthusiast websites devoted to the female driver, the majority of online car groups have mixed gender participation. Since my original investigation, Facebook has emerged as a significant online site of car information and fandom; there are currently hundreds of Facebook pages devoted to car models, car subcultures, and car organizations. Enthusiastic car owners participate in these various online spaces through the posting of car photos and other auto related materials, announcements of car events and field trips, and questions directed toward the hundreds of other car owners who visit these sites. Through the process of “lurking” – i.e. observing on sites without participating – and the taking of extensive field notes, I gained additional insight into how chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck owners call upon online participation to construct themselves as woman drivers. These Internet locations were not only a rich source of ethnographic data, but also served as effective participant recruiting tools for this project.

**Material Artifacts**

Whether examined on site or online, women’s automobiles were also part of the investigation. Paint color, interior, engine size, modifications, performance options, and whether
the car had an automatic or manual transmission was duly noted. I also examined personal artifacts – i.e. trophies, dash plaques, newspaper clippings, owner’s manuals, restoration scrapbooks, decals, and historical automotive paraphernalia – posted as online photos or placed in the vehicle’s proximity at car shows and other auto events. Photos provided by the participants were also an important contribution to the ethnographic process. Through them I was able to examine how women use their cars as well as how they relate to them in a variety of settings.

Data Analysis

To interpret the data collected from various ethnographic methods, I began with an open coding process in which I attached a code to each meaningful item of data in the transcribed interviews and field notes. I then proceeded to code the codes (axial coding) in two rounds. Since the first section of each dissertation chapter focuses on the same themes (i.e. the ways women alter gendered practices around cars) my first round of coding focused on data that fit into the specific chapter categories (car choice, car use, and driving behavior). For the second part of each chapter – which focuses on the meanings ascribed to the automobile – I used axial coding to uncover the common themes within each population as well as those shared by all three groups of women drivers. Although the amount of meaningful data – from 110 interviews and pages of field notes – was often overwhelming, the coding process resulted in a myriad of themes that were rich, multi-layered, meaningful, and often profound.

Margaret Ely writes, “being trustworthy as a qualitative researcher means that the processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people who are studied” (93). I attempted to engage in trustworthy qualitative research through reflexivity and triangulation. As Berg and Lune assert, reflexivity “implies that the researcher understands that he or she is part of the social world(s) that he or she
investigates” (205). Being reflexive means I understood that my prior experience in automobile advertising and my own participation in classic car culture, plus my general feelings about the auto industry, gender, and women’s automobile use, influenced how I consider American car culture and those who participate in it. I also understood that since much of car culture skews conservative, it was necessary to subdue my critical feminism stance in the presence of others, and accept the views of the participants without criticism or judgment. As an older graduate student of the same generation as many of the participants, I recognized that my research is often regarded as odd or suspicious. As a shy person, my reticence is often taken as snobbery; therefore, I endeavored to move out of my comfort zone as I engaged women in conversation and encouraged them to talk about their cars. While, as a classic car owner, I could be considered part of this social world, I did not accept everything I observed at face value nor have I simply reported my findings as facts. Rather, I considered the material I collected as raw data open to analysis, interpretation, and verification, and employed the theories of gender performativity and objectification to frame this investigation. One of the ways I corroborated my findings was through the triangulation process as described by Lincoln and Gruba (qtd. in Ely 96). Triangulation provides the opportunity to look for consistencies and similarities in data collected through multiple ethnographic methods. Triangulation – i.e. comparing data from online and onsite observation, interviews, and artifact analysis – strengthened my research findings and allowed me to offer them with confidence. As I present my discoveries in this project, I endeavor to be open and honest about my methods of data collection and analysis, participant selection, the interview process, and the shortcomings of my observation activity.

I approached this dissertation project from a critical feminist perspective. The underlying objective in my research is to dispel masculine automotive knowledge as universal or authentic
by providing an alternative perspective through the voices of women’s experience. A critical perspective provides the means to uncover inequities in how men and women have been historically constructed in relation to the automobile and how such inequities have constrained women drivers as well as influenced how we think about women and cars. Critical ethnography, Berg and Lune suggest, refers to a kind of advocacy perspective of the investigator. As Berg and Lune write, “critical ethnography is an orientation where the researcher has a concern about social inequalities and directs his or her efforts toward positive change” (206). In this project, my goal is to bring attention to the ways in which the woman driver has been negatively portrayed, as well as to uncover the methods of resistance employed by women in various car cultures. Thus I am not just describing the social life of female car enthusiasts, but rather, am advocating and presenting positive cultural change. The major elements in a critical ethnography, Berg and Lune argue, include a “value-laden approach that seeks to empower participants […] by challenging the status quo and addressing various concerns about power and control structures” (206). Through the voices of 110 women, this project not only critiques mainstream automobile culture, but also demonstrates how women are able to challenge negative representations through the formation of alternative woman driver constructions and the reimagining of the woman behind the wheel.

The Woman Driver

The original woman driver stereotype – which depicted women as easily distracted, careless, emotional, inept, overly cautious, unpredictable, and accident prone – was promoted in the years following World War I as a means to discourage women from driving. As Scharff notes, in the early years of automobility, women drivers were repeatedly characterized as “incompetent and flighty behind the wheel, helplessly ignorant in the face of mechanical
problems, terrified of the rigors of motoring over mud holes or in storms, and timid (though
dangerous) on crowded city streets” (“Wheel” 167). The early stereotype constructed women as
less capable drivers than men; the male driver, on the other hand, was most often portrayed as
knowledgeable, skilled, mechanically gifted, confident, and in possession of natural automotive
intelligence. The woman driver stereotype that emerged after the Second World War focused on
the qualities that were admired in wives and mothers but assumed to compromise women’s
driving ability. The woman driver as careful, practical, and concerned with safety, comfort, and
reliability was continually positioned at odds with the man behind the wheel whose “natural”
confidence, driving ability, and daring constructed him as a more proficient and therefore, more
legitimate driver. While the characteristics that have historically framed the woman driver as less
than her male counterparts have been repeatedly disproven, remnants of both stereotypes
stubbornly remain. As Scharff writes, “the suspect figure of the woman driver remains a part of
our folklore and popular literature” (“Wheel” 172). As will be noted in the next chapter – which
provides a more thorough history and analysis of the woman driver stereotype - assumptions
about gendered automotive preferences and driving behavior continue to inform the construction
of women behind the wheel. Such ingrained beliefs have not only influenced automotive
production and marketing, but have also impacted how women consider themselves as
automotive consumers as well as how they construct themselves as drivers. In her examination of
gendered practices in young drivers, Redshaw noted that a number of women “seemed keenly
aware of being excluded from what was seen as a ‘more authentic’ experience of driving because
they were women” (“Cultures” 84).

This project disrupts dominant representations of women behind the wheel through the
examination of three alternative constructions of the woman driver. The decision to focus on
three groups – rather than a singular example - was deliberate. As the goal of this project is to
demonstrate the existence of individuals who represent varied relationships to cars and driving,
the selection of just one representative group could mark that population as an exception rather
than evidence of a larger phenomenon. In addition, relying on one alternative example could
easily be construed as simply replacing one stereotype with another. While expanding the
investigation to three groups results in an analysis that is ultimately less detailed than a singular
focus on a particular female driving population, considering multiple groups provides the
opportunity to reflect upon the great diversity of women – and cars - that inhabit these woman
driver categories. Calling upon three populations also suggests the existence of additional
woman driver categories outside the context of this study. The possibility of multiple woman
driver populations lends credence to the argument that dominant constructions are not, and have
never been, truly representative of all women drivers.

While individual car subcultures are usually internally homogeneous, they each attract
distinct driver populations. Thus calling upon three alternative constructions of the woman driver
presents the opportunity to consider the meanings ascribed to the automobile by individuals who
often differ in age, income, occupation, race, sexual preference, marital status, geographical
location, and ideological worldview, and who drive vehicles that vary in make, model, style,
size, year of production, power, performance, and handling. The participants represent a growing
segment of female drivers who challenge dominant constructions but whose presence in
American car culture – and scholarship – often is ignored. This project attempts to remedy this
absence through attention to women who own and drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and
pickup trucks. This project is not intended to be an exhaustive study of women who trouble the
woman driver category. I am not arguing that those who defy dominant constructions of the
woman driver are gender rebels, renegades, or revolutionaries. And neither do I mean to portray those who freely subscribe to the construction of the woman driver as family caretaker or who consider cars as simply means of transportation as somehow inferior. Rather, by calling upon the real life automotive experiences of three distinct populations of women drivers, my intention is to illuminate women’s complicated relationship to the automobile, to demonstrate how women perform gender as a means to expand and enrich – but not replace or eliminate – the woman driver category, to explore the myriad of meanings women ascribe to cars, and to suggest new possibilities for the woman behind the wheel.

The Chapters

Chapter 2: The Gendering of the Automotive Experience

This chapter examines the social and automotive climate that instigated the gendering of the automotive experience, and how this gendering process continues to influence and inform popular perceptions of the woman driver. It investigates how the development, promotion, and maintenance of dominant woman driver stereotypes have impacted women’s car choice, car use, and driving behavior in the United States over the past one hundred years. It provides the framework for the three succeeding chapters which each focus on a particular population of women drivers. It argues that through car choice, car use, and driving behavior, as well as new meanings ascribed to cars, the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks are able to not only challenge the notion of the gendered automotive experience, but in the process, to reimagine themselves as women drivers.

Chapter 3: The Chick Car

This chapter introduces the chick car through a brief historical retrospective of the “woman’s car” in American automobile culture. It investigates the process by which women
appropriated the chick car from the masculine car culture for their own use, and provides an overview of the 48 chick car owners who participated in this project. Through the lens of gender performativity, it demonstrates how this population of female motorists calls upon the alternative car choices, car uses, and driving behaviors made possible by the chick car to disrupt common perceptions of the woman driver. Considering the relationship between women and cars through Vannini’s theory of objectification, it examines how the various meanings ascribed to the chick car not only have the ability to enhance women’s automotive experience but also serve as important contributors to women’s subjectivity. It concludes by asserting how this investigation of chick car drivers adds to our knowledge of women and cars as it offers an alternative construction of the woman driver.

Chapter 4: The Classic Muscle Car

This chapter provides a brief history of the American muscle car and the culture that developed around it during the 1960s and early 1970s. It examines the progression of women’s participation in muscle car culture, as “avid” spectators during the muscle car’s heyday, to drivers and/or owners involved in the classic muscle car hobby today. Relying on interviews with 37 classic-muscle-car-owning women, it investigates how women’s gender performance in the classic muscle car provides them with the means to enter a historically masculine automotive climate while maintaining conservative values and traditional gender roles. It reveals the myriad of meanings women ascribe to the classic muscle car that differ considerably from those of husbands, sons, and male peers. In doing so, it not only disrupts the longstanding association between the automobile and masculinity, but also demonstrates how women have the ability to invent or reimagine cars for their own use and meaning making.
Chapter 5: The Pickup Truck

This chapter uses a current 30-second Chevy Silverado commercial to suggest how the “cowgirl” provides an acceptable identity for women’s entry into the historically masculine pickup truck culture. It provides a short chronology of the pickup, from man’s workhorse, to recreational necessity, to family vehicle, to the cowgirl’s companion. Mirroring the framework of the previous chapters, it investigates how gender performance is influenced by women’s vehicle choices, vehicle uses, and driving behaviors, and reflects on how the meanings women ascribe to the pickup are neither a carbon copy of men’s nor are they reminiscent of women’s relationship to “family” vehicles. Rather, the alternative gender performances and woman-car relationships that transpire through women’s pickup truck ownership suggest new ways of thinking about the woman driver.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter returns to the question posed by the title of the project. It reflects on how the participants view the woman driver and how they position themselves within the woman driver category. It summarizes the major themes produced by women who own chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks to demonstrate how this group of women – no matter what they drive and why they drive it - is united in the construction of new woman driver categories that challenge and disrupt existing stereotypes. It offers a rationale not only for this project, but also for the continued study of the woman driver in all of her many manifestations. It provides suggestions for new directions in research, and calls for a new understanding of the multifaceted, diverse, creative, and empowered woman driver.
CHAPTER 2: THE GENDERING OF THE AUTOMOTIVE EXPERIENCE

The Woman Driver Stereotype

In most areas of the United States, the automobile is considered a necessity rather than a luxury. It should be no surprise, therefore, that well into the twenty-first century, men and women own and drive cars in nearly equal proportions. Yet despite the universal appeal and use of the automobile, it remains, as Martin Wachs asserts, “one of the most ‘gendered’ aspects of American urban life” (“Spheres” 86). The gendering of the automotive experience was instigated soon after the introduction of the gasoline-powered automobile in the early twentieth century. This gendering was viewed as a solution to the growing problem and implications of women’s automobility in American society. Michael Berger writes, “the automobile threatened to restructure the social status of women and the meaning of family life in America” (“Drivers” 257). The gendered division of the automotive experience – in car choice, vehicle use, and driving behavior – was promoted as a strategy to sell more cars as well as to maintain the gender hierarchy in a changing society. More than a means of transportation, cars were instrumental in the reproduction and maintenance of proper gender roles. As Scharff notes, auto manufacturers had “a propensity to divide the world by gender,” so much so that automotive technology and marketing seemed to be developing within separate masculine and feminine spheres (“Electricity” 76). The woman driver stereotype – in its various manifestations - was a product of this conscious gendered division.

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11 In “Gender in the History of Transportation Services,” Margaret Walsh writes, “By 2000, women made up half of licensed American drivers, and 71 percent of women held drivers’ licenses, compared with 75 percent of men.”

12 The woman of the early twentieth-century woman driver stereotype was invariably white. While there were certainly women of color who drove automobiles, it was their race, rather than gender, that presented a threat to mainstream American car culture. Consequently, stereotypes of the African American driver were widely circulated during this time. As Kathleen Franz notes in “The Open Road,” these depictions typically featured Black men behind the wheel as unskilled, reckless, and primitive.
As Scharff writes, to automakers and most Americans, “‘driver’ meant male; the modifier ‘woman’ meant interloper” (“Wheel” 166). The woman driver stereotype was promoted as an effective means to separate – and devalue – women’s automotive experience from that of the male driver. As Martin Wachs notes, over time, through reiteration, and based on little demonstrable proof, women drivers have been increasingly portrayed as “less proficient, decisive, more flighty, and more unpredictable than male drivers” (“Automobile” 106). While “woman driver” does not carry the same stigma today as it did in the post World War I and World War II eras, the gendering of the automobile experience continues to adversely influence how the woman driver is considered in twenty-first century American car culture.

The women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks who participated in this project fully understand the negative connotations associated with the “woman driver.” While a few of the participants distanced themselves from the prevailing stereotype by denying its existence, the majority chose to reinvent the category by investing it with new meanings drawn from their own experiences behind the wheel. A short history of the gendering of the automotive experience, therefore, will not only illustrate how the phenomenon has become so embedded in American car culture, but will provide a context from which to consider how the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks have responded to cultural gender mandates regarding women’s vehicle choice, car use, and driving behavior and in the process, have reimagined themselves as women drivers.

From Female Motorist to Woman Driver

The woman driver stereotype has become so integrated into the popular consciousness that it is difficult to imagine a time when the woman behind the wheel was not a subject of critique or comedy. Yet during the early days of automobility, the female motorist, while
somewhat of a rarity, was rarely a cause for concern. The first automobiles made available to the American public were individually handcrafted and assembled by experienced artisans. Expensive to build and costly to maintain, the early cars were accessible only to those with considerable financial means. With limited power provided by electricity or steam, they conveyed fashionability and consumption rather than power and danger. Consequently, such automobiles were considered expensive fashion accessories rather than serious driving machines. As Cotten Seiler remarks, American culture in the late nineteenth century perceived the automobile as a toy rather than a tool, “an expensive whirligig produced for the amusement of the effete rich” (52). The limited range and power of the early automobiles resulted in a common driving experience and the appearance of gender equality among its drivers. It was wealth, status, and sophistication – rather than gender – that determined who could operate one of these early motor vehicles. As the caption from an automotive image from the time asserts, “Since the automobile has come into fashion, it is interesting to know that it is quite as good taste for a lady to drive as for a gentleman” (qtd. in Seiler 52).

The permission awarded to early female motorists allowed them to call upon these “toys” to expand their social, physical, and political horizons. Female motorists of significant means were, in fact, the first to engage in and document cross-country automobile trips. As Virginia Scharff writes, “female cross-country drivers, literally revealing themselves to the public eye in their open vehicles, challenged the notion that women ought to remain sequestered at home” (“Wheel” 77). The early acceptance of the female driver also encouraged the “New Woman” – a growing population of college educated, unmarried white women employed in professions such as teaching, nursing, or social work – to claim the automobile as a vehicle of liberation from
domesticity. As Seiler asserts, these early motoring experiences opened female motorists to “driving’s sensations of mastery, freedom, thrill, and self determination” (55).

As the gasoline-powered automobile grew in popularity, motorists, women included, envisioned exciting new driving opportunities through the expanded power and range such vehicles offered. Henry Ford’s application of mass production to the motorcar not only revolutionized the auto industry, but also made the gasoline-powered automobile increasingly affordable to members of the growing middle class, including its female members. In addition, technological innovations such as the electric starter (which replaced the hand-operated crank) and the closed car made automobility increasingly attractive and pleasurable to the female motorist. As non-elite women joined the growing ranks of motorists, they claimed the vehicle as representative of a newfound freedom accompanied by a forceful demand for the vote. Middle-class women of color viewed the automobile as the means to escape the insult and danger they often encountered on public transportation.13 Women’s desire to claim equality with men as drivers, rather than as members of an elite driving class, was met with curiosity, trepidation, distrust, and disapproval. Opponents to women’s newfound agency, fearful of what empowered and mobile women might do when given the opportunity, found it necessary to develop strategies to alter women’s relationship to cars. This was accomplished through the gendering of the automotive experience. As class lost its position as the qualifier for automobility, gender emerged as the ultimate determinant of appropriate vehicle choice, automobile use, and driving

13 Literature that addresses early African American automobility focuses primarily on the car’s role as an indicator of status, a vehicle of assimilation, a conduit of social protest, or a symbol of liberation in racially divided America. Paul Gilroy, in Driving While Black, writes, “there can be no doubt that cars […] are now at the heart of the cultures of compensation with which some American blacks have salved the chronic injuries of racialized hierarchy” (94). Franz argues that the emergent black middle class of the 1910s and 1920s adopted the automobile “as a material expression of racial uplift ideology” (“Road” 132). However, Carla Lesh, in her unpublished dissertation, suggests that for African American women, the automobile was valued primarily as a safe alternative to traveling on segregated public transportation.
behavior. Thus, as Domosh and Seager note, the early development of the mass automobile
culture was “intentionally and thoroughly masculinized” (123). Cultural notions of masculinity
and femininity were applied to the automotive experience as a means to promote and enforce
proper driving behavior. Separate sphere ideology was called upon to encourage appropriate
automobile choice and use. Applying these gendered constructs to the American automotive
experience positioned women’s automobility in opposition to, rather than in concert with, that of
men. Through this historical and cultural process, the female motorist was henceforth
transformed into the “woman driver.”

The Woman’s Car

From the earliest days of the auto industry, notes Ella Howard, “automotive
manufacturers had characterized specific vehicles as appropriate for the woman driver” (143). In
their research into youth driving cultures, Sarah Redshaw and Greg Noble reflect on the broadly
held opinion that many cars are identified with one gender or the other. As Redshaw and Noble
write, “the gendering of cars, the difference between what were regarded as ‘guy cars’ and ‘girl
cars’ was evident in comments from women as well as men” (“Mobility” 18). The first attempt at
gendered automotive marketing was the promotion of the electric as the “woman’s car.” The
growing popularity of the gasoline-powered automobile in the early twentieth century resulted in
a significant loss of market share for the manufacturers of electric cars. Seeking to maintain or
increase its consumer base, the electric was repositioned from a symbol of wealth and status to a
vehicle particularly suited for the (middle-class) woman driver. Ruth Brandon writes, “sedately
paced, clean, silent, and simple to operate, […] electrics reinforced the most traditional and (to
men) most comforting notion of woman’s role” (164). This marketing move served a number of
purposes. It presented financial benefits to electric manufacturers as it offered the promise of a
steady and ready-made consumer base. It directed women away from gasoline-powered automobiles and appeased the egos of male drivers reluctant to share the open road with women drivers. It offered the possibility of constraining women’s driving through the electric’s limited power and range. And it allowed manufacturers to specifically link particular automotive characteristics – e.g. luxury, beauty, ease of operation, cleanliness, and comfort - to the woman driver, reinforcing cultural prescriptions of middle-class femininity. The electric’s most ardent supporters, writes Scharff, believed women would use electrics “to accomplish the social and domestic tasks that were part of the middle-class homemaker’s vocation, without overstepping the bounds of feminine propriety” (“Wheel” 41). Even Henry Ford, whose gasoline-powered Model T quickly dominated the marketplace, purchased an electric vehicle for his wife Clara, insisting that the simple, comfortable, clean, and quiet electric was inherently more appropriate for the woman behind the wheel.

In order to effectively reconfigure the electric as an embodiment of femininity, the gasoline-powered automobile was constructed as masculine. As Michael Berger writes, “everything about the car seemed masculine, from the coordination and strength required to operate it, to the dirt and grease connected with its maintenance” (“Drivers” 257). The association of the gasoline-powered car with masculinity was attempted in three ways. The first was to embody the vehicle with masculine qualities. Descriptors such as noisy, dirty, and smelly, as well as rough, tough, and powerful, were applied to the automobile as well as the man who drove it. Scharff writes, “Ford designed the Model T to be literally Everyman’s Car: sturdy, thrifty and powerful,” characteristics he and others associated with working-class masculinity (“Wheel” 55). Conceiving the car as an expression of masculinity positioned it at odds with femininity and the electric automobile.
The second attempt to masculinize the gasoline-powered vehicle was to claim automotive maintenance as a masculine task. In the first few decades of motoring, knowledge of auto mechanics was often considered a prerequisite to driving. The complexity of the machinery, and the filth associated with its care suggested that only male drivers were properly qualified to attend to the mysterious machinations of the gasoline automobile. From very early on, asserts Scharff, “women’s automobility was identified with vehicles that offered comfort and cleanliness” (“Electricity” 77). The ideal woman, as promoted in automotive advertising from 1915-1934, was not one to get her hands dirty. Commenting on the representation of a female automotive consumer in a 1932 Fisher Body ad, Laura Behling writes, “her overtly accentuated characteristics of attractive feminine womanhood, a long-legged blonde beauty and comically inept mechanical nuisance, epitomizes her disinterest in the male-dominated realm of technical knowledge” (28). In Women and the Machine, art historian Julie Wosk remarks, “men had long been portrayed as strong and technically able, women as frail and technically incompetent, or at least unsuited to engaging in complex technical operations” (9). Women were discouraged from working on cars; as Michael Berger writes, those who did so “were likely to diminish their femininity” (“Drivers” 259).

The third and perhaps most significant effort to link the gas automobile with masculinity was the conviction that its successful operation was dependent on particular masculine behaviors. As Clay McShane argues, in order to establish automobility as a male activity, men quickly claimed the emotional traits necessary for driving – “steady nerves, aggression, and rationality” – as masculine (156). Women, on the other hand, were assumed to suffer from “natural impulsiveness and timidity, inability to concentrate and single-mindedness, indecisiveness and foolhardiness, weakness, and utter estrangement from things mechanical”
The behavior culturally ascribed to femininity was accentuated to demonstrate the unsuitability of the female body for placement behind the wheel of gasoline-powered cars.

As Clarsen writes, women’s resistance to the parlor-like comfort of electric cars “signaled their intention to refuse Victorian notions of women’s dependency, refinement, and restriction to a world separate from men” (“Dust” 15). Despite the efforts of automakers to market the electric as the “woman’s car,” female drivers of the growing middle class set their sights on the power and performance the masculine gas-powered automobile could provide.14

Seeking horizons beyond the confinement of domesticity, women envisioned automobility as the means to reach them. In the minds of many women, attainment of such lofty goals was not to be realized through the limited power of the meek electric, but rather, from behind the wheel of the noisy, dirty, and aggressive gasoline-powered automobile. When the electric eventually disappeared from the roadways, it became necessary for auto industry decision makers to reconsider the production and promotion of gasoline-powered automobiles through the ideology of separate spheres.

As the number of women drivers grew, separate sphere ideology was increasingly called upon to divide the automotive experience along gender lines, and to designate vehicles with specific qualities as appropriate to male or female drivers. This strategy first appeared in the decades following women’s successful campaign for suffrage. As Behling notes, “the male-dominated automobile and advertising industries created the ideal woman by reinforcing the

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14 Ford’s revolutionary Five Dollar Day policy was instituted in 1914 not only as a means to retain auto factory workers, but to also make the (Ford) automobile financially obtainable to the working-class men who built them. As Martha May notes, the Ford family wage also sanctioned and promoted what was to become known as a middle-class form of family life, “in which a male wage supported a dependent family” (388). The Ford family wage transformed the working-class woman who worked out of the home into a middle-class housewife “responsible for producing transportation” (Scharff “Wheel” 146).
same traditional sex and gender roles that much of society feared had been irretrievably lost en route to women’s enfranchisement in 1920” (13). However, the potential of the separate sphere automotive marketing strategy was most effectively realized in the post World War II era. Rising prosperity and the move to the suburbs in the decades following the Second World War led to the necessity of a second car in many households. To combat the isolation of a homebound life, the suburban woman demanded a car of her own. While automakers were aware of the lucrative marketing possibilities suggested by a swelling female consumer base, they were reluctant to estrange male customers by appealing to the female driver. The solution was a marketing strategy that affirmed women’s approved gender roles without disrupting the masculinity and presumed technological expertise and driving skill of the male driver. Automobiles destined for women’s consumption were marketed as domestic technologies, tools that enabled the “lady of the house” to fulfill the culturally prescribed roles of wife, mother, and caretaker. As Scharff reflects, “auto industry promoters developed a dual strategy designed at once to preserve their own masculine identities [and that of their male consumers] and to serve their economic interests, tied to selling more cars” (“Wheel” 115). This strategy – which relied upon an implicit acceptance of men’s and women’s unchanging and inherent biological natures – was not only successful in directing women toward a particular type of automobile, but also determinedly categorized the woman driver as caretaker and consumer.

Separate sphere ideology, writes Judy Wajcman, dictates that the “powerful, large car is destined for the male head of household” (135). Consequently, sports cars, muscle cars, performance cars, full sized luxury cars, and pickup trucks have traditionally been marketed

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Wajcman writes, “while the automobile did not create suburbia, it certainly expanded and accelerated this process” (127). Although most middle-class suburban women had access to the automobile, the majority of working-class women could only go where feet or public transportation took them. As Wajcman notes, the poor segments of society “have been literally left stranded in, or outside of, cities designed around the motor car” (129).
almost exclusively to the male driver. Women, on the other hand, are most often steered toward
the pedestrian, utilitarian “second” car that enables them to perform household tasks and run
family errands. During the 1950s and 1960s, the nine-passenger station wagon was promoted as
the ultimate transportation for growing families. While Dad might take over the steering wheel
on the weekends for family outings, its weekday use most often identified it as “mom’s car”. The
1970s hatchback, with a trunk designed to hold the optimum number of grocery bags, was
considered perfect for “running around town and shopping” (Wajcman 135). The 1980s
introduced the roomy, reliable, safe, and ubiquitous minivan to the American woman. And in the
1990s, the small SUV was regarded as the vehicle of choice for the growing population of
“soccer moms.” While, in the twenty-first century, small SUVs and crossovers are increasingly
promoted by advertisers as “fun to drive,” they remain constructed as women’s cars, with the
dubious promise of pleasure in the performance of women’s domestic tasks.

The extension of household technology to include the automobile was one of the main
ways in which auto manufacturers targeted the female consumer in the post war era. This trend
has not abated; a number of scholars have noted that when women are present in automobile
advertising directed toward female consumers, it is primarily in the caretaker role. In “Pink
Truck Ads,” Ella Howard notes that despite feminist advertising appeals to auto manufacturers
during the 1980s, auto manufacturers continued to promote “reductively normative gender
visions of both women and men,” citing ads in which “large trucks moved over rough terrain in
ads targeting men, while those addressing women featured traditional, non-challenging images”
(149). In Driving Women, Deborah Clark notes how automobile advertising reflects a culture “in
which women are either objects or mothers” (88). In “Evolution of the Chick Car,” my initial
investigation into the chick car phenomenon, I observe that although women are a significant
percentage of chick car buyers, they are rarely if ever featured as drivers in advertising for the Miata, MINI, or New Beetle. Rather, when women appear behind the wheel in automotive advertising, it is most often in vehicles deemed gender appropriate. As Clarke asserts, “Automotive maternity\(^{16}\) situates mothers as both essential and cultural, a woman who drives the right car” (“Driving” 77). While automakers and marketers might claim such efforts are merely good business practices as a means to appeal to the female consumer base, they are, in fact, reinforcing the cultural role ascribed to automobiles in maintaining the gender order. As material objects, automobiles work, as Vannini might argue, “as resources for the establishment, maintenance, and regeneration of power and status differentials” (19).

Despite the attempts of automakers and marketers over the past 100 years to direct women toward a specific category of car, the woman driver of the twenty-first century often has her own ideas about what kind of vehicle she should own and drive. The women who participated in this project have chosen vehicles rarely marketed to the woman driver. The cars they drive are not, by any stretch of the imagination, family automobiles. Chick cars rarely hold more than two persons comfortably; classic muscle cars are too loud, fast, and undependable for daily family travel; the difficulty of getting in and out of a full size pickup truck makes it an impractical choice for the daily transportation of young children. While the women in this project acknowledge that the cars they drive are most often associated with the male driver, most do not perceive themselves or their automobile choices as masculine. Rather, they consider themselves as individuals who have made vehicle choices based on their own desires, driving ability, identity, and lifestyle. While they may have driven family cars in the past, or foresee doing so in the future, at this particular point in their lives they have opted to select vehicles that

\(^{16}\) Clarke defines automotive maternity as “a condition in which one’s role as a mother relies, at least in part, on one’s place in car culture – as driver and as vehicle” (“Driving” 77).
identify them as something other than mother or caretaker. In doing so, they have, in the context of Vannini’s theory of objectification, formed a “reciprocal relationship” to a car. They have ascribed new meanings to chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks and in turn, have assumed new identities from old technologies. Through their vehicle choices, the women in this project challenge assumptions about what women can drive in order to reinvent the persona of the woman driver. In this way, they are following the lead of early female motorists who, as Clarsen writes, “produced their own enabling stories and material sites, creating the conditions for their participation in worlds otherwise denied them” (“Dust” 3).

Woman’s Car Use

The growing popularity of the gasoline powered automobile among female motorists in the early twentieth century created a crisis in American households. Women’s entry into the public sphere behind the wheels of noisy, dirty, and powerful automobiles not only disrupted social conventions regarding women’s proper place, but also challenged popular notions of mobility, manners, and morality. To many men, writes Wosk, “these women may have seemed to be abandoning their proper maternal and caretaking roles” (xiii). This distress was accompanied by an underlying fear of bad behavior, recklessness, and promiscuity among the auto-liberated female population. As Domosh and Seager remark, the idea that women might be able to take independent control of their mobility – and of powerful machines - “was seen by many commentators as a threat to family stability, good social order, and women’s sexual purity” (123). However, as it became clear that women had no intention of abandoning automobility, it was necessary to redirect the female motorist’s growing passion for driving into a new, more gender appropriate, direction. This was accomplished by constructing women’s driving within the context of separate sphere ideology.
The gendering of the automobile experience, therefore, was accomplished not only through the assignment of particular types of automobiles as either male or female, but also through the creation of gender guidelines as to how and for what reasons the vehicles were to be used. As Scharff suggests, the question of how people used cars rested on the “common, longstanding assumption that men and women, quite naturally, would have different expectations and desires” (“Wheel” 119). Men were expected to drive for excitement and exhilaration. They got behind the wheel to experience independence, recklessness, and mastery of the car and the road. The car was considered part of the male identity; thus its power, technological superiority and performance was often conflated with the man who drove it. From its very beginning, writes Berkley, the automobile was presented in mass culture “as offering its male drivers freedom, power, and control” (1). Women, on the other hand, were assumed to drive not for the excitement such an action might provide, but simply as a means to perform prescribed tasks and fulfill gendered roles. A woman’s natural caretaking role was reflected in the car she drove and how she used it; rather than consider an automobile built for power or performance, women were directed toward vehicles that were reliable, economical, practical, and safe. Driving was not to be enjoyed, but rather, became a duty to be performed, a means to get from here to there, a practice rather than an experience. While a man’s driving was often viewed as an escape from domesticity, women’s use of the automobile tied her more closely to it. As Seiler writes, the primary function of the woman’s car was to be “the wife’s helpmeet in the fulfillment of her daily tasks” (60). As the car became a part of an increasing number of households, it was promoted to the woman of the house as a domestic technology. Rather than a “path to public power,” the woman’s car became an extension of the private sphere (Scharff “Wheel” 163).
Prior to the advent of the gasoline motorcar, men and horses were the primary providers of transportation and delivery services. However, once the automobile replaced the horse, writes Ruth Schwartz Cowan, “women began to replace men as household suppliers of the service” (“More” 83). The gas-powered automobile transformed women of the middle class from receivers of goods – e.g. laundry, groceries, and shoe repair – into transporters of them. As part of what Cowan refers to as the “industrial revolution in the home,” the automobile was marketed as a means to reduce labor of the middle-class housewife by making tasks easier. However, the car had the opposite effect of actually increasing women’s workload as it enabled and encouraged them to perform more work in less time. Middle-class women became responsible for tasks - shopping for the household, running errands, and transporting children - once performed by paid and unpaid servants. Not only was the automobile called upon to aid women in the execution of these new daily duties, but also limited women’s driving to a prescribed area. While the gasoline-powered automobile had the potential to increase women’s mobility, its cultural construction as a domestic technology succeeded in keeping women closer to home.

Once women became the “deliverers of services,” the category of chauffeur was added to the middle-class housewife’s traditional job description. Mothers became responsible for picking up children from school, picking up husbands from train stations, picking up clean clothes from the laundry, and picking up groceries from the supermarket. As Cowan notes, the changes in household technology brought on by industrialization altered the work processes of housework so that separate spheres became, from the point of view of the middle-class household, “not only possible, but desirable” (“More” 69). By the later half of the twentieth century, the separation of spheres was assumed to be a normal arrangement, and was called upon by inventors, entrepreneurs, and marketers in the product development, manufacture, and marketing of
household technologies. Thus while automotive advertisers relied upon the promise of performance and status in the public sphere to appeal to the male driver, the automobile was marketed to the middle-class suburban housewife as indispensible to the performance of daily domestic chores. As Cowan writes, “the suburban station wagon is now ‘Mom’s Taxi’” (“Less”). Although women may have been interested in automotive qualities such as style, performance, or power, they were encouraged to consider those vehicles with the traits - spaciousness, reliability, and ease of handling - that could accommodate their many domestic requirements. And despite women’s necessary and important work during the Second World War – on the home front as “streetcar conductorettes,” and overseas as drivers of ambulances, transport vehicles, Jeeps, and supply trucks – at war’s end they were relegated to using the automobile in the performance of domestic tasks (“American Women in World War II”). In the post World War II era, how and why a woman used an automobile was key to the establishment and maintenance of her proper gender identity. As Margaret Walsh asserts, the American woman of the 1950s was encouraged to consider the automobile as “the ideal way in which she could fulfill her multi tasks as modern mother, wife, and worker” (“Wheel” 3).

Although women began to enter the workforce in record numbers during the 1970s, automakers were slow to recognize the changes in women’s position in the American economy and society. Consequently, the majority continued to manufacture and market vehicles to women primarily as wives, mothers, and family chauffeurs. In 1983, the minivan was presented to the

17 In the 1950s and 1960s, automobile manufacturing and marketing was based on the old car company philosophy of “we produce the cars and the public will buy them” (Kinter). Consequently, the white, suburban, middle-class housewife was called upon to represent all potential female consumers, regardless of race. In the post war era, these representations were rarely challenged. As Franz notes, automobiles “offered a springboard into the middle class for African Americans both economically and culturally” (“Road” 140). Mirroring the mainstream culture through automobile use became a means to express equality. As Seiler remarks, “a group’s level of automobile use and ownership could be taken as an index of its participation in the ‘American way of life’” (113).
American woman as the consummate family vehicle.\textsuperscript{18} As Cindy Donatelli argues, the timing of the minivan introduction coincided with Ronald Reagan’s “family values” campaign, often considered a backlash against the second-wave feminist visions of the 1960s and 1970s. As a “lifestyle enabler,”\textsuperscript{19} the minivan – purposefully and aggressively identified with women by automakers, marketers, and the media – reinforced the notion that women bear primary responsibility for housework and childcare. As such, writes Donatelli, the minivan belongs to the nineteenth and twentieth century technological developments that “define domesticity as a female regime by identifying women, rather than men, with material objects and practices in the context of the home” (90). The minivan, along with the small SUVs and crossovers that followed, were marketed as crucial to women’s performance of “transportation work,” characterized by Kelley Hall in her dissertation “Who’s Got the Keys to the Minivan” as a form of child care closely associated with women’s family work. As Hall writes, “transportation work is symbolically linked to heterosexual womanhood and motherhood through women’s responsibility for these different transportation tasks” (22). As twenty and twenty-first century versions of “mom’s taxi,” the minivan, small SUV, and crossover are not only representative of the gendering of the American automotive experience, but also continue to be significant contributors to the gendered division of family work in American society.

As they get behind the wheels of chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks, the women of this project convincingly demonstrate that women’s automobile use is not limited to transportation work, workplace commuting, or the performance of household tasks. As they take

\textsuperscript{18} The “soccer moms” featured in media and marketing for the minivan were overwhelming white. Auto manufacturers continued to believe that black women would purchase what white women bought. Perhaps more significant, as Jason Chambers notes in Madison Avenue and the Color Line, advertisers remained hesitant to feature African Americans in print and broadcast advertising well into the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{19} Taken from a 1994 quote by Dick Johnson, former creative director at Chrysler ad agency BBDO, cited by Cindy Donatelli (88).
part in road rallies and driving tours, participate in car shows and cruises, or haul horse trailers, building materials, and camping equipment, they provide endless new ways to consider how women enjoy and employ cars. While women’s automobile use has been historically constructed as a means to “do gender” in a conventional and culturally prescribed manner, the women of this project refuse to be defined and confined by such narrow gender norms. By engaging in unexpected and unconventional automotive activities and driving practices, they expand the notion of what a woman driver is and how an automobile might be used.

When women “do gender” in an automobile through engaging in transportation work, they are, as Hall argues, incorporating the idea that caring for the family in this manner is women’s work, indicative of their love and caring, and part of their self-image as women, wives, and mothers. While a good many of the women who participated in this project are, in fact, wives and/or mothers, they do not view the automobile as solely a means to validate and support these cultural roles. As Vannini suggests, women’s various engagements with the automobile provide the opportunity to contest the “hegemonies of tasks” embedded within it (15). Like the early female motorists, these contemporary women view the automobile as a means to escape domesticity, whether temporarily or permanently, rather than underpin it. By calling upon the automobile for reasons that often have little to do with practicality, functionality, or family, the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks perform gender in an unconventional, but altogether authentic, way. They are, as Butler might argue, examining the possibilities for cultural transformation of gender through their corporeal acts and driving practices. As they resist dominant gender performances of how cars are to be used, they are actively assuming new constructions of the woman driver.
Women’s Driving Behavior

The gendering of the automobile experience was also applied to driving behavior. The automobile’s early association with masculinity led to the assumption that men and women would perform differently as drivers. As men were perceived as having a “natural” affinity for cars, male driving was the standard by which driving skill and performance was measured. This placed the woman driver in an untenable position. She was expected to drive in a way that reflected her femininity, yet was routinely criticized for doing so.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, gender was called upon to point out the inherent strengths of men’s driving as well women’s weaknesses. While men were most often characterized as bold, adventurous, and skilled drivers, early critics of women drivers cited three presumed sources of women’s inferiority behind the wheel. Women’s emotional instability, physical weakness, and intellectual deficiencies, it was argued, made the fairer sex ultimately unfit for driving. It was believed the woman driver, writes Scharff, suffered from “natural impulsiveness and timidity, inability to concentrate and single-mindedness, indecisiveness and foolhardiness, weakness and other estrangement from things mechanical” (“Wheel” 26). Early woman driver stereotypes reflected this disparaging evaluation of women’s driving behavior, often employing essentialist notions of women’s inborn nature to deride women’s driving ability. Imagery and rhetoric were called upon to construct the woman driver as incompetent and inept. In her research, Wosk notes that newspaper editorials asserted, “women were poor drivers because of their inherent nervousness and their delicate physical and emotional constitutions” (128). Illustrations and cartoons of the period often portrayed women drivers as “frivolous, silly, and mystified by machines” (xiii). Popular imagery in magazines and newspapers contributed to stereotypes of women as “accident prone and driving recklessly out of control” (133).
Photographs of female drivers stranded by the side of the road reinforced cultural notions of women as “technological naïfs” (132). Increasingly, writes Wosk, women were seen as “easily distracted drivers whose carelessness, emotionality, and incompetence could lead to catastrophe” (133). Popular culture was rampant with examples of how women’s physicality, emotional constitution, and intellectual shortcomings set them apart from the strong, stable, and smart man behind the wheel.

These popular and pervasive stereotypes, which came into fashion at the time when women were beginning to challenge traditional roles on the highway as well as in the home, were implemented not only as a means to curtail women’s automobility, but also to construct and confirm automotive knowledge, mechanical ability, and driving skill as the province of men. As historian Beth Kraig remarks, “to enable the free-wheeling male driver to gun down the road, […] women were characterized as naturally docile and painstakingly safe in their driving habits” (“Human” 298). “Science” was also called upon to confirm the notion of women’s inadequacy as drivers. As Domosh and Seager assert, “scientific” studies were conducted “that ‘proved’ that women were mentally, physically, and biologically incapable of mastering the complexities of driving” (125). As Jennifer Berkley notes, after the publication of numerous reports on women’s proven driving skill, the strength of the stereotype that constructed the woman driver as nervous, passive, cautious, and inept seemed to diminish. In its place came new “and more insidious discussions that evoked traditional stereotypes of female identity when reporting on women and cars, frequently circumscribing women in a sphere of domesticity as wife or mother” (65). While women’s driving behavior was still framed in opposition to that of men, it was evaluated based on the ways in which it adhered to or abandoned cultural constructions of motherhood. Driving
skill, which had long been considered a masculine attribute, was reframed for the woman driver as safe driving practices.

While caution in driving was associated with female incompetence in the early years of automobility, it has since become incorporated in the figure of the woman driver naturally concerned about safety. In the post World War II era, women, as individuals deemed responsible for the wellbeing and protection of all family members, were encouraged, if not compelled, to consider safety first when purchasing an automobile. Not only were women expected to favor cars with prominent safety features, but they were directed to drive safely and carefully as well. The emphasis on safety reclaimed the negative connotations associated with the caution and “carefulness” of the early “woman driver” stereotype and reconfigured it into a reflection of women’s “natural” role as caretaker. In doing so, it also effectively reinforced the gendered roles assigned to the woman driver.

In 1955, reports Jeremy Packer, the Automobile Association of American reflected on the lower rate of accidents among female drivers to make the claim that “women were better drivers than men” (47). Other automotive safety “experts”– which included Professor A. R. Lauer of the Driver Research Laboratory at Iowa State University - soon got on the woman-as-safe-driver bandwagon to attest that “women in general are more law abiding than men and have better attitudes toward traffic ordinances” (Packer 55). The US Army “Porto-Clinic” testing unit asserted that while men may have more ease behind the wheel, “women always seem to have safety in mind” (Packer 57). In the reports of “experts” as well as in the editorials of popular women’s magazines, not only were women deemed accountable for their own safe driving conduct, but as guardians and nurturers were also ultimately responsible for taming the aggressive driving behavior of husbands and sons. While male drivers are apt to equate risky
driving with superior driving skill, the production and legitimization of safe driving as women’s special province placed the responsibility for family safety on the female motorist, further exacerbating gendered differences and expectations in men’s and women’s driving behavior.

Aggressive driving has always been tolerated, if not celebrated, in the male driver. Car chases are central to American popular culture; fast-driving men are romanticized in film and literature; thousands gather annually at racetracks all over the country to satisfy a vicarious “need for speed.” Men are expected to embrace the thrill that accompanies high velocity and aggressive driving. To the male driver, writes Sarah Redshaw, “the car is promoted as the means and emblem of individual expression through aggression and performance” (“Articulations” 129). While society may superficially revile the reckless male driver, he is more often than not awarded “wistful respect” (Kraig “Woman” 212). Yet women who drive assertively are harshly criticized as unfit mothers and drivers. Current discussions of the “road rage” phenomenon admonish the woman who has traded in her station wagon for a sport utility vehicle, and who has become, in the process, “as aggressive as her male driving counterparts” (Parker 24). This reprogramming of women’s “natural” proclivity for safety and security, writes Parker, is considered “the ultimate sign of the danger of the road” (24). Such cultural critiques discourage assertive driving in women through the repeated reinforcement of gender scripts. Women, as “natural” caretakers and nurturers, are socially reprimanded when abandoning the appointed role of safe driver. Although male drivers are also often parents, they get a free pass where safe driving is concerned. In the eyes of auto manufacturers, women are solely accountable for the safety of children, teenagers, and senior parents. Male drivers, on the other hand, are only accountable to themselves. This focus on safety for the female driver, and the noted absence of such concern for men behind the wheel, suggests men have permission to be irresponsible
drivers. What is ironic is that since men are more likely to contribute a higher percentage of family income, the male driver’s lack of concern for safe driving practices puts the family in a financially precarious position should an accident occur.

As safe drivers rather than skilled drivers, women’s driving behavior will always be considered less than that of their male counterparts. The singular focus on safety not only reinforces gender stereotypes on the road and in society at large, but also has the potential to discourage the woman driver from exploring other driving experiences. However, the women who drive chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks engage in driving behavior that while not necessarily masculine, challenges gender roles. While they consider themselves safe drivers, they pride themselves on new driving skills acquired through alternative driving behaviors. The women who drive chick cars hone their driving ability through auto cross, driving schools, and motor tours complete with turns and “twisties.” Women in classic muscle cars challenge gender expectations as they gun rumbling engines, burn rubber, and participate in track days at local speedways. Those in pickup trucks assume cowgirl personas, reclaim tomboy roots, or take ownership of their ruggedness as they go off-roading, haul horse trailers, and carry cargo. In doing so, these diverse driving women engage in gender performances that contribute to new constructions of the woman driver.

Reclaiming the Woman Driver

Georgine Clarsen writes, “as women redrafted notions of femininity through their love of cars, they were engaged not only in struggles over what it meant to be female in the twentieth century, but also in debates about what an automobile was [and] how it might be used […]” (“Dust” 5). As this brief automotive history of the woman driver suggests, during the past century, the gendering of the automotive experience has been an active process that has shaped
women’s automobility through the alignment of women’s vehicle choice, car use, and driving behavior to cultural notions of femininity. Whenever it appeared that women had made gains as drivers – particularly during the World Wars when women were recruited as ambulance and supply truck drivers, or when driving the cars men off to battle left behind – women were confronted with a cultural backlash that quickly quelled such advances. As public anxiety over women’s growing presence in car culture increased, the woman driver was put under enormous pressure to conform to gendered notions of driving. Although female motorists, over time, have had some success in challenging these limitations, their voices are often lost to history, overridden by dominant representations of the woman driver in the auto industry, the media, and popular culture. As Domosh and Seagar write, anxieties about women and cars are not just historical; “they continue to be potent, shaping popular culture and actual transportation outcomes” (125).

However, as this project will demonstrate, there are populations of driving women who have not so much defied cultural gender expectations as reclaimed them. Through their engagement with chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks, the participants in this project illustrate how, in the words of Carl Knappett, “objects can escape the intentions of their creators” (117). These female motorists have taken ownership of vehicles produced for a male market and reconfigured them for women’s use. In the process, they have not only challenged the notion of the gendered automotive experience, but through vehicle choice, car use, and driving behavior, have reimagined themselves as women drivers.
CHAPTER 3: THE CHICK CAR

Woman’s Car to Chick Car

In the election year of 1996, the “soccer mom” became an important demographic category in American politics. While the term was most often called upon to define a particular white, middle-class, female suburban voter base, it was eventually appropriated into mainstream culture to describe a woman who devotes an inordinate amount of time transporting her school-age children to a myriad of sporting events and other activities. When pictured in the media, the soccer mom was invariably found behind the wheel of a minivan, crossover, or small SUV. As Cindy Donatelli suggests in “Driving the Suburbs,” the soccer mom phenomenon was the product of “an accidental convergence of vehicle choice, children, sport, and election year politics” (92). While women drivers have long been linked to a specific type of family vehicle – e.g. the station wagon of the 1950s and 1960s and the 1970s hatchback sedan - the soccer mom era forever cemented the notion of the “woman’s car” into the public consciousness. Sturdy, spacious, safe, and utilitarian, the “woman’s car” has become synonymous with a vehicle equipped especially for carrying kids and cargo.

That this association between the woman driver and a particular configuration of the “woman’s car” has persisted into the twenty-first century suggests it is not simply a temporary strategy tied to selling candidates or cars. Rather it represents an enduring effort on the part of the automotive industry and the mainstream media to situate women in cars – and in the world at large – primarily as wives and mothers. In her postfeminist reading of the minivan as a material object, Donatelli argues that vehicles in this category act as “a material shell for the retrograde conservative agenda of ‘family values’”(85). The strong identification of these vehicles with
women not only serves to reinforce traditional gender roles, but also effectively obscures the possibility of alternative relationships between women and cars.

However, in the late 1990s, while the soccer mom and her minivan full of children were making the nightly news, a new type of female driver emerged. She appeared in many guises: as a young single woman making her way in the world, a married professional focused on career, or middle-aged empty nester looking forward to a more independent life. And the car she chose was not sturdy, spacious, or practical in any sense of the imagination but was small, quick, stylish, and fun. The automobiles claimed by this particular group of women soon garnered the classification of “chick car.”

The “chick car” label embraces a number of automobiles currently on the market. An unofficial survey of recent articles by automotive writers suggests that the “chick car” category includes the Mazda Miata (MX-5), Fiat 500, MINI Cooper, VW New Beetle, and for the more affluent, the Audi TT. The chick car category includes models that, in the words of journalist Ted Laturnus of the *Globe and Mail*, “are undeniably cute and pleasing to the eye, as well as being reasonably affordable and a pleasure to drive.” All of the cars, with the exception of the Audi, fall into the $19,000 - $25,000 range; in addition, the popularity and availability of used chick cars makes them attainable for the majority of women in the market for a small, nimble, and economical automobile. Chick cars are lightweight, quick, easy to park and easy to maneuver. However, the most common attribute awarded the chick car is “fun to drive.”

The chick car is the antithesis of the traditional “woman’s car.” Originally produced to address the driving preferences of car savvy men looking for a sporty, nimble, and stylish vehicle to race, tour, or burn rubber at a stoplight, the chick car has been appropriated by a particular

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20 2012 pricing
population of women for their own use and enjoyment.\textsuperscript{21} The chick car label is often used pejoratively, to describe a vehicle that, as \textit{Autoline Detroit} host John McElroy remarks, ‘no manly-man would be caught dead driving.’ (qtd. in Flint). However, the derision associated with the chick car label has little to do with the automobile’s quality, style, or performance. Rather, it is due to women’s unexpected appropriation of a particular automotive category traditionally associated with the male driver.

The history of the phenomenon known as the “chick car” begins in the years following the Second World War. During the 1950s and early 1960s, separate sphere ideology encouraged women to focus on domesticity through dedication to home and family. As John Urry writes, the automobilization of family life during this period “brought the newest and most expensive car models to the male ‘heads of families,’” whereas “social responsibilities pushed women towards inhabiting safer family models” (132). However, during the 1960s and 1970s, the burgeoning women’s moment fueled women’s entrance into the workforce in record numbers. As migration to the suburbs left many women without access to public transportation, the auto became an important means to women’s workplace participation.\textsuperscript{22} Walsh writes, “women’s participation in the labor force has been the impetus for their greater familiarity with and usage of automobiles” (“United States”). As working mothers were still considered responsible for gendered household tasks, most continued to drive vehicles that reflected their domestic role. However, many women

\textsuperscript{21} Sir Alec Issigonis, iconic designer of the original MINI (a four time winner of Monte Carlo Rally over foreign competition), was quoted as saying, “I don’t want bloody women driving my cars!” (Pettet). As Terry Jackson writes for Bankrate.com, “it’s hard to reconcile the Miata’s ‘chick car’ reputation with the fact that it’s the most popular car among racers in the Sports Car Club of America.” However, as a number of auto journalists concede, despite their masculine histories, there are certain automobiles on the market that, for various reasons, “hit women where they live” (Laturnus). And although men are the primary owners of these vehicles, women’s appropriation of MINIs, Miatas, and New Beetles has placed them into the chick car category.

\textsuperscript{22} The women’s movement may be considered responsible for the increase in the number of white middle-class women drivers as work participation provided many women with the financial means to purchase cars of their own. However, women of the lower classes – including a disproportionate number of women of color – often remained dependent on and restricted by public transportation. As Wajcman writes, “the assumption of car ownership discriminates against the poor and the working class in general […]” (129).
put off marriage and childbearing in order to establish careers. And a good number of them
desired to own and drive cars that, rather than validate the common representation of the woman
driver, would reflect their newly acquired personal and professional identities.

However, the choice of cars available to the working woman during the 1970s and 1980s
was limited at best. Gender parity had not yet reached women’s paychecks; the types of
automobiles that appealed to professional men were financially inaccessible to the average
working woman. Thus most women drivers had to make do with the unreliable and
unimaginative American economy cars of the time. Or they were regulated to what auto industry
executives referred to as “secretary” cars; i.e. low-priced versions of popular “pony” cars such as
the Ford Mustang and Chevrolet Camaro, “with fewer features and less power” (Levin). Efforts
to market these vehicles to women reflected auto industry assumptions that power and
performance in an automobile were of little interest to the woman driver.

During the late twentieth century, the infiltration of foreign vehicles into the United
States and the resulting competitiveness within the auto industry resulted in a plethora of car
models and styles and the technology that accompanied them. The simplicity, small size,
economy, tight handling, and attractive resale value provided by imports – characteristics rarely
addressed by American auto manufacturers - were especially appealing to the woman driver. The
era also witnessed a steady increase in women’s salaries; consequently, working middle-class
women soon discovered a wide variety of affordable cars available to them. These cars were not
bare-bone economy types nor were they designed for carrying kids and cargo. They were not
marketed to women; rather, they appealed to a young or young-at-heart, free-spirited individual
who thoroughly enjoyed the act of driving. The automobile that attracted women with few
domestic proclivities or responsibilities was small, sporty, quick, nimble, and most important of
all, fun. Although originally produced to fulfill the sports car demands of the male driver, when women embraced this type of automobile, it garnered the cultural label of “chick car.”

The Chick Car Driver

The transition from the woman’s car to the chick car was accompanied by a change in the women who owned them. In her traditional role as the family chauffeur of “mom’s taxi,” the woman behind the wheel was considered more of a vehicle operator than driving enthusiast. However, once a particular group of women discovered the automotive experience the chick car offered, women’s relationship to the automobile was irrevocably altered. Suddenly, driving was not a duty to be performed, but was an enjoyable and rewarding undertaking in its own right. Driving was no longer the means to an end, but the driving experience became, in fact, the end in itself. As Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Wajda note, objects do not possess fixed meanings; rather, gender can influence individuals to “know objects in different ways” (xvi). As women appropriated the chick car from the masculine car culture for their own use, the automobile took on new meanings as a source of identity, a builder of confidence, a means to new social and automotive networks, and a vehicle of liberation. Not merely a means of transportation, the chick car was embraced by women drivers for what it said about them, how it made them feel, and the ways in which it enriched and embellished their lives.

The 48 chick car drivers who participated in this project were recruited from Facebook pages and Internet discussion groups, as well as online newsletters and websites devoted to specific vehicles. Participation on these various sites suggests more than a passing interest in cars and driving. While attempts were made to recruit equally on Miata, MINI, and VW New Beetle 23

23 Online automotive forums are frequented primarily by auto enthusiasts and those looking to become more informed about their cars and more involved in car culture. Since these sites were the prime recruiting tools for this project, it is not surprising that the respondents were perhaps more experienced and enthusiastic about cars than the average chick car owner.
groups and pages, permission to post on these sites was not always obtainable. There was significant resistance from male gatekeepers in both the Miata and VW Beetle groups. This difficulty was somewhat expected; in my past work on chick cars, Mazda representatives were particularly sensitive to the chick car label.\textsuperscript{24} And when I requested permission to reproduce VW and Audi ads in the journal article “Evolution of the Chick Car,” VW Corporate refused to provide consent. The MINI gatekeepers, on the other hand, were quite welcoming; consequently, MINI drivers made up the largest constituency (66\%) of participants.

The female participants ranged in age from 22-72; however, the vast majority (80\%) were over 40 years of age. 51\% of the respondents were childless; 56\% of those with kids identified as “empty-nesters;” i.e. women over the age of 40 with grown children. 85\% of the respondents were white, and 80\% had, at minimum, a solid middle-class income.\textsuperscript{25} 94\% identified as heterosexual, and two-thirds were married or in long-term relationships. In terms of ideology, the respondents were fairly evenly divided between conservative, moderate and liberal with a slight tilt to the left. This is understandable when considering that automobiles classified as chick cars are primarily imports. Not only are women more likely to buy imports, but as political analysts have suggested, liberals are also more likely to own foreign cars than are conservatives.\textsuperscript{26} Since the participants were scattered throughout the United States and Canada, the interviews were conducted by phone or in written form. I attended a few local MINI and Miata events as an observer, and frequented the Facebook pages and discussion groups of the various car clubs.

\textsuperscript{24} My husband, who was an advertising executive on the Mazda account during the time the article was en route to publication in the \textit{Journal of Popular Culture}, submitted the permission forms to the Mazda legal department as a favor to me. Understanding the sensitivities of the client, he avoided the term “chick car” when requesting consent, which was eventually granted.

\textsuperscript{25} Of those who provided information, 83\% (38 out of 46) disclosed annual incomes of over $40,000. This corresponded fairly closely with age; all but three of the participants over 40 had incomes of over $40,000.

\textsuperscript{26} According to Jason Siu of \textit{AutoGuide.com}, of the top ten cars purchased by women in 2012, the first nine were imports. In the Gallop Poll results of car preference by political ideology during the 2004 presidential election, it was determined that conservatives are more likely to drive domestic cars whereas liberals are more likely to drive imports.
weekly in order to reflect upon women’s participation in chick car culture. In these online and on
site locations I took extensive field notes, documenting how women accessorized their cars, how
female chick car owners interacted with male and female participants, the occasions in which
women sought help or advice, and the roles women assumed within chick car culture. Through
this process, I was able to better understand the importance of the chick car in the lives of this
group of women. I discovered how women’s active engagement with cars can provide them with
increased automotive knowledge and driving skill; how chick car culture opened them up to
unique automotive experiences as well as a new social world of like-minded car enthusiasts; how
automobiles can serve as a significant source of identity construction and empowerment in
women’s lives; how women’s confidence as drivers can have repercussions in other areas of their
lives; how women can creatively construct new meanings from technologies historically
considered masculine. As I recorded the voices of this group of women, I was repeatedly struck
by the imaginative ways in which these driving chicks called upon their automotive experience –
car choice, vehicle use, and driving behavior - to reclaim identities as women drivers.

The Chick Car and the Automotive Experience

The introduction of the minivan during the mid 1980s was accompanied by what Susan
Douglas and Meredith Michaels refer to as the “new momism.” This long-term propaganda
campaign, write Douglas and Michaels, was an attempt by the media to “redomesticate the
women of America through motherhood” (9). The “new momism” was based on the notion that
motherhood is not only central to women’s lives, but is the primary means by which all women
define themselves. Automakers embraced the new momism as an effective way to associate ideal
motherhood with appropriate vehicle choice, car use, and driving behavior, ignoring those
women whose identities – and car preferences - were not solely dependent on motherhood.
Women’s appropriation of the chick car over the past two decades suggests US auto manufacturers grossly misread the woman driver. As the responses from 48 car savvy women indicate, not all women identify primarily as moms, and not all women desire a car that is roomy, practical, efficient, and humdrum. Whether single or in a relationship, childless or parents, these women sought automotive experiences that, rather than associate them with motherhood, distanced them from it. The reasons women offered for the purchase of a Miata, MINI, or VW New Beetle not only revealed personal automotive preferences, but also provided insight into how women remain constrained by expectations of domesticity and how car choice offers the possibility of escape – whether temporarily or permanently - from such limitations.

Chick Car Choice

The women who contributed to this project entered the car buying process with very definite ideas of what they were looking for in a car. Despite differences in age, location, income, and relationship status, the automotive qualities considered important by the 48 chick car owners were remarkably similar. Safety, style, comfort, and economy topped most women’s must have lists. A 32-year-old space planner desired a “unique looking car” that was safe and economical to drive. A 61-year-old office manager cited “safety ratings, good mileage, and appearance” as qualities she looked for in an automobile. A 55-year-old community services officer decided on her chick car for its appearance, good gas mileage, and because it was “sturdy and safe.” These automotive preferences are not surprising, as they have traditionally been linked to the woman driver.

Throughout automotive history, writes Scharff, innovations designed to enhance safety, no matter how useful to all drivers and passengers, were “coded as feminine and touted as concessions to frailty” (“Electricity” 84). As Mimi Sheller notes, the female motorist has long
been associated with safety, through driving practices, as well as in her societal responsibility for the family. The women who contributed to this project were very attentive to automobile safety; however, they did not want to compromise the automotive experience in order to attain it. Thus they spent hours checking consumer safety ratings, looking at videos of accidents on YouTube, comparing the number of airbags among various models, and asking questions of other chick car owners on automotive forums and Facebook pages in order to uncover auto possibilities that, in the words of a 61-year-old MINI driver, were not only safe, but also an “absolute joy to drive.’

As Scharff writes, early car manufacturers lamented the implications of feminine influence on automobile design, fearing that women “sought style and ease above all else” (“Wheel” 121). The women who participated in this project, much like their early twentieth-century counterparts, had great interest in both style and comfort, but not in the traditional sense. Style in the chick car, stated the women who own them, is what makes the Miata, MINI, or New Beetle distinctive. As a 28-year-old textile artist remarked, “I wanted a car that was unique and would stand out.” Of her car preferences, a 56-year-old inventory controller asserted, “She’s gotta have style; she’s gotta be good looking.” The cars available to working women during the 1970s and 1980s were, for the most part, boxy and boring econoboxes. The family vehicles driven primarily by suburban housewives were built for function rather than fun. The women who own chick cars have rejected the uninspired design of commuter cars, minivans, crossovers, and family sedans and have replaced them with cars with styling that makes them, in the words of a MINI owner, “cool.” In addition, the women admire and desire the “retro” style of the Miata, MINI, or New Beetle not only as a link to an iconic automotive past, but also because such styling makes the car less likely to become dated, contributing to its potential resale value.
Comfort was also an important consideration for chick car drivers, but not as a “cushy place to sit” (Scharff “Wheel” 171). Rather, comfort referred to how the interior dimensions of the vehicle enhanced women’s driving experience. A 55-year-old occupational therapist declared the chick car is the “perfect size for me, easy to steer, and comfortable.” Of her MINI, a 59-year-old telecommunications engineer stated, “it fits women’s smaller personal space; it is a tight, comfortable car.” As Scharff observes, car manufacturers were originally uneasy about automotive qualities associated with femininity, and were hesitant to incorporate changes in design that would accommodate the woman driver. It was only after women “challenged gender norms, proving their ability to operate gas powered vehicles” that “feminine” qualities such as comfort became factors in automotive style (“Wheel” 66). The women who drive chick cars remain insistent on comfort, and seek vehicles that accommodate their smaller frames and enhance how they experience the automobile. As a 59-year-old Milwaukee native remarked, she chose her MINI because “it’s a tight comfortable car, affordable, with good gas mileage.”

Economy – in car cost and car expenses – was also a key consideration in women’s vehicle choice. The majority of project participants were professionals who had achieved a modicum of success in their respective fields. While many desired a car that would reflect their newly won status, they were hesitant to spend an unreasonable amount of their hard earned cash on an automobile. Thus affordability and value were extremely important to this group of drivers. A 45-year-old speech pathologist decided on a chick car for its superior reliability and handling, and because “I could afford it.” Of the MINI, a 63-year-old administrative supervisor remarked, “it’s a very obtainable car.” Economy was also referred to repeatedly through mentions of “good gas mileage,” “gas efficiency,” and a reputation as being “economical on gas.” Women, as a rule, have less discretionary income to spend on cars than their male
counterparts. Consequently, features that improve a car’s present and future value – reliability, durability, economy, and classic design - are important to women who own chick cars.

In describing what led them to consider a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle, the women often referred to automotive features that, while not typical attributes of the traditional “woman’s car,” make the chick car attractive to the woman driver. The chick car’s smaller size was repeatedly mentioned as an important attribute. As a 63-year-old administrative supervisor stated, “I’m a small person and this is a small car.” Automobiles have traditionally been produced with the male driver in mind; consequently, they are designed to fit men’s, rather than women’s, bodies. Women, especially those of shorter stature, must often make a myriad of adjustments when in the driver’s seat to reach the accelerator, clutch, and brake pedals, to see over the front of the hood, to avoid blind spots, and to sit comfortably. As Gloria Jeff and Regina McElroy note, despite the association of safety with the female driver, the prevalent safety feature, the safety belt, “seems to be designed for a 6-foot man, not a 5-foot 4-inch woman” (91). The designers of the original driver airbags neglected to consider how, when activated, this safety feature could prove dangerous to women drivers, particularly those of shorter stature.27 John Urry writes, “cars were originally designed to be inhabited by the average male body and only recently are adjustable to drivers of various heights and reaches” (133).

Chick cars, the participants often noted, are more comfortable to women as they fit a woman better than the typical domestic model. The interiors are compact with everything in easy reach. As the 56-year-old owner of a 2008 Miata remarked, “I’m only five feet tall so it’s very comfortable to sit in and drive for long periods of time.” Many of the participants acknowledged that import manufacturers are more likely to address the smaller stature of the woman behind the

27 In “The Tragedy of Airbag Fatalities to Children and Short Drivers,” Byron Bloch notes that, although the advent of airbags has been a major safety advance that has saved many lives in frontal collision accidents, “some driver-side airbags have caused severe to fatal injuries to short women drivers” (1).
A 53-year-old technical writer remarked, “I have tended to like Asian cars because I’m only five foot three and I think they’re engineered better for small people.” Not only does the small interior space of the chick car fit women’s bodies better than full size automobiles, but the more compact body style makes the chick car easier to park and to maneuver in traffic.

The smallness of the chick car also lends to its consideration as woman’s private space. Of her 2006 MINI, a 42-year-old remarks, “It feels like home when I am in it. It is a comfort to me.” Donatelli refers to the minivan as a “locus of daily family life” (89). As a family vehicle, it serves as a continuation of, rather than escape from, women’s domestic domain. As Donatelli asserts, the design of the minivan effectively “delimits women’s access to public space and independent activity” (84). The chick car’s smaller interior dimensions not only provide more intimacy, but its lack of accommodation for children designates the interior as an “adults only” space. To those who spent years behind the wheels of bulky family sedans, minivans, and SUVs, the smaller dimensions and drivability of the chick car offers a more pleasurable, personal, and desirable automotive experience. In her choice of a 2011 MINI, a 57-year-old university administrator remarked, “I used to have a minivan I drove the kids around in. I hated it. So I wanted a smaller car. And I wanted something that was fast.”

While this group of women mentioned characteristics historically associated with the women driver, features most often linked to men’s driving preferences – i.e. good handling, power, and performance - were also on the women’s “must have” list. This is not a new phenomenon. As Scharff notes, Henry Ford originally designed the Model T to be sturdy, thrifty and powerful. Although millions of women found such characteristics appealing, Ford and others

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28 Chick cars are overwhelmingly imports. Miata is of Japanese design; New Beetle is the product of German engineering; the MINI has a British heritage but, since purchased by BMW in 1994, has a strong German influence. In terms of chick cars not included in this project, the Audi TT is German, the Mitsubishi Eclipse is Japanese, and the official website describes the Fiat 500 as “unmistakably Italian” (“Vehicles”).
“associated these attributes with masculinity” (“Wheel” 55). The responses from chick car owners suggest that a century later, there are still “millions of women” who demand performance in an automobile. Of her 2011 MINI, a 57-year-old university administrator exclaimed, “I like the power it has; I like the way it handles.” A 45-year-old tech teacher declared, “I’m a driver, so need a car that handles well and can keep up with me.” A 62-year-old teaching consultant revealed, “I do like to drive cars that handle the road with ease at decent speeds.” In fact, nearly all contributors to this project mentioned the importance of good handling. Not only was handling a necessary attribute, but in their choice of a chick car, women were also looking for a vehicle that was nimble and quick. In the process of interviewing women for *Everything Women Always Wanted to Know About Cars*, auto journalist Lesley Hazleton discovered, “What women enjoy about speed is very much the same as what men enjoy about it: the excitement and the challenge of it, the test of nerves and ability, and the pure sensation of it” (180).

Many of the participants had spent much of their lives behind the wheels of hand-me-down junkers, economy cars, or family vehicles. At this point in their lives, they relished the opportunity to drive a car with spirit and spunk. Of her 2013 MINI, a 58-year-old technical writer enthusiastically remarked, “It’s pretty much like driving a go-kart on the road. It’s fast, it’s snappy, [and] it handles beautifully.” A 26-year-old psychotherapist exclaimed, “it’s fast and takes corners at 100 miles per hour.” Women’s need for speed, realized in the engine and design of a chick car, challenges the common claim that “the desire to drive at high speed is primarily a masculine one” (Freund and Martin 50). While the women placed an emphasis on safety features, they did not view automobile safety and performance as being mutually exclusive. Although the US auto industry has traditionally marketed the automobile by gender as either fast or practical, powerful or safe, or nimble or dependable, the women who participated in this
project understand that not all automobiles are so easily categorized. In their minds, the chick car – small, safe, and economical, as well as powerful, fast, and responsive - represents the best of both the masculine and feminine automotive worlds. They recognize that attention to safety does not have to preclude having fun. Of their respective chick cars, a 49-year-old Minnesotan remarked, it “keeps me safe despite high-speed fun;” a 31-year-old claims specialist asserted, “It’d better be safe but fun to drive;” and a 54-year-old legal assistant stated, “safety first, and plus it’s just fun.”

Power, performance, and handling provide the chick car with the automotive feature of primary importance to this group of women drivers: fun to drive. In the 48 interviews conducted, “fun” was used in association with the chick car over 300 times. The women who participated in this project described the chick car experience as “seat of your pants driving,” “funness,” and a “roller coaster ride.” They described the chick car as a “fun little toy,” “pocket rocket,” and “a plucky little car that is up for anything.” In fact, fun was so important to this group of drivers that they often overlooked the car’s weaknesses. Although the car’s reliability was not what a 55-year-old occupational therapist had hoped for, as she explained, “the fun of driving makes it worth it.” While her car is frustrating at times due to mechanical problems, a 42-year-old psychotherapist noted, “it is economical on gas, it sounds mean and intimidating, it’s fun and it’s solid. I wouldn’t trade it for any other car on the road.”

Throughout automotive history, women have been expected to drive for particular reasons, and have been encouraged to purchase vehicles with the qualities and features that support and reinforce such purposed driving. While safety, reliability, functionality, and comfort are universally recognized as legitimate female driver concerns, performance, power, handling, and “funness” are considered the automotive preferences of men. The panic over women’s
appropriation of chick car by the male bastion of auto manufacturers, auto journalists, and auto aficionados is based on the misassumption that women – and the gendered expectations that accompany them – should have different requirements and desires in cars. There is an underlying conviction that, because women do not have the mechanical knowledge, auto sophistication, or car experience to appreciate the Miata, MINI, or New Beetle, they should not be driving them. In the minds of many male drivers, women’s unwarranted admiration of the chick car serves to devalue the car and the man who drives it. However, the female chick car drivers who contributed to this project are not dissuaded by such convoluted assumptions. They have purposefully and determinedly chosen cars with a combination of features – safety, style, and economy, as well as power, handling, and “funness” – that serve their own needs as drivers.29

To the majority of women who participated in this project, the chick car choice was a radical, and welcomed, departure from past automobiles. Young women, many who had spent their initial driving years behind the wheels of hand-me-down family cars or second hand wrecks, desired a car that was more than transportation. As a young mom from Denver told me, “my first vehicle growing up […] was not the coolest car. But you could get a lot of people in it and it was free.” Middle-aged professional women viewed possession of a chick car as a well-deserved promotion from the economy commuter automobiles of their youth. A 47-year-old accounting clerk, who had always driven “pre-owned” vehicles, found herself in a position where she could afford to buy a brand-new automobile. As she exclaimed, “I love the car, I love that I was able to get it. It just makes me happy driving it.” Empty nesters, long relegated to functional family vehicles, relished the opportunity to drive an automobile of their own choosing. A 55-year-old educator, who describes her MINI as “all mine,” purchased it on

29 Only one of the women 48 interviewed for this project was unhappy with chick car ownership. However, her dissatisfaction stemmed primarily from the inferior treatment and lack of support she experienced at the auto dealership.
impulse without her husband’s knowledge. A 53-year-old Medicare manager had spent all of her married life behind the wheel of the family car. As she remarked of her spice orange metallic MINI, “now that I’m an empty-nester […] I’m happy to finally have bought my dream car.”

Whether seeking independence from mom and dad, celebrating a professional milestone, or escaping from years of domesticity, a chick car purchase often marks a new phase in a woman’s life. Of her New Beetle, a 22-year-old Californian remarked, “I saved up in high school to buy it. It was my first car that was mine alone.” Middle-aged working women often consider ownership of a chick car as a means to modestly display professional success. Of her 2005 MINI Cooper, a 63-year-old administrative supervisor remarked, “others look at it with appreciation not envy.” A Medicare operations manager rewarded herself with a MINI at the age of 50 when she completed her bachelor degree. To empty nesters, many who had spent a good portion of their lives transporting family members, chick cars are appealing because they cannot, in fact, hold too many people. As a 43-year-old Texas homemaker remarked, prior considerations were “can it hold all my kids? Now it’s what’s fast and fun?” While young single women often view the chick car as a way to discover themselves and have some fun before being saddled with adult responsibilities, to women over 45, driving a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle allows them to face the remainder of their lives, not with resignation or trepidation, but rather, with anticipation and gusto. As a 63-year-old administrator exclaimed, “I said many, many years ago that I will never let my hair go grey; you will never see me in public in glasses; I will never drive a station wagon; and when I have to quit climbing down into a sports car I’ll stop driving.” A 53-year-old Miata owner declared, “If I were to drive off into the sunset, this would be the car I would drive.” Whether purchasing their first car on their own, choosing a car that represents their accomplishments, or buying their own car for the first time in their lives, these women did not
look to the functional family sedan, the powerful muscle car, the practical hybrid, or the ubiquitous SUV. Rather, they chose vehicles that were quick, nimble, cute, plucky, and fun, a cluster of characteristics that aptly describes the chick car.

The cultural assumption that all women are, or desire to become, mothers at some point in their lives has greatly influenced how the auto industry produces and markets cars to the woman driver. Regardless of race, age, class, sexual orientation, relationship status, or occupation, women are encouraged and expected to drive the cars and assume the gendered roles ascribed to them by the auto industry and American car culture. As Vannini argues, values, identities, and ideologies often take shape through material forms. Thus the cars the majority of women drive for much of their lives indelibly mark them as “women drivers.” The words the participants in the project used to describe the chick car – plucky, fun, sporty, cute, noticeable, happy, zippy, responsive, sharp, sexy, sweet, feisty, quirky, amazing, unique, badass, and cool – suggest they made a determined and conscious decision to select a vehicle that, rather than identify them as practical and predictable, “housewifey” or maternal, would portray them as fun loving, adventurous, unusual, and “a little bit crazy.” As the responses from this group of driving women demonstrate, choosing a chick car can alter how a woman thinks of herself, and how the world views her behind the wheel. These women consciously sought cars with the characteristics they considered important to their lifestyles, identities, and status. The uses to which they put the chick car, and the driving performances they assumed when behind the wheel, opened up possibilities for new constructions of the woman driver.

Chick Car Use

In the early years of the motor age, upper class women often demonstrated fitness for automobility through participation in long distance motor trips and driving competitions. As
Seiler notes, prior to World War I, American women “participated in races, auto clubs, and ‘gymkhanas’ […] and took to the open road on cross-country reliability tours” (53). During the first third of the twentieth century, the spirit of the early female motorists was incorporated into a successful series of automobile serial novels in which young female protagonists “garbed in duster and gauntlets, manipulating gears and brakes with the assurance of veterans capture thieves or treacherous gypsies,” put out forest fires, and survived numerous car wrecks as they traveled to distant locations in their motor cars (Inness 49). In these early representations of exceptional female drivers and fictional young heroines, adventure, rather than practicality, defined women’s automobile use.

The women who participated in this project inadvertently recall the spirit, daring, and audaciousness of early women motorists as they call upon the chick car to discover new ways to use the automobile. Other than a few of the Miata drivers who live in cold climates and put their convertibles away for the winter, the majority call upon their chick cars as “daily drivers.” As a 63-year-old MINI convertible owner remarked, “It’s my daytime car, and I put the top down every opportunity I get. My commute is only five miles and if it’s not snowing or raining or freezing the top is down.” While the women often use their cars in ways that might be expected - as a vehicle for work or school commutes, household and personal errands, and shopping - they do not limit chick car use to the performance of everyday tasks. The women appreciate the chick car for its ability to make daily rituals more enjoyable; however, its greater value is in the new, unusual, and exciting opportunities it provides them as drivers. To the women who drive it, chick car use is not only functional. It is, more importantly, fun.

While the chick car is great for tooling around town, its most popular use among this particular group of drivers is the road trip. As the owner of a pepper white MINI with a black top
remarked, “I go on a lot of out-of-town trips because it’s just fun to drive.” A 57-year-old university administrator revealed, “any time my husband and I have to go anywhere, we take my car not his big SUV. It’s fun to drive. And it has the extra sunroof, we put the roof back, put on a little music and we go!” The women who participated in this project have, collectively and enthusiastically, driven thousands of miles all over the United States and Canada in their chick cars. A 46-year-old inventory control supervisor has driven her chick car to “literally the four corners of the state of Minnesota.” A MINI owned by a 42-year-old Californian has been to eleven different states, stopping at Lassen National Park, Yosemite National Park, and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks along the way.

While some of the women have specific destinations in mind, often the trip itself is the main reason for getting behind the wheel. The owner of a yellow 2001 New Beetle exclaimed, “I drive across country probably twice a year, for various fun things. My road trips give me something to look forward to.” A 57-year-old Miata owner from Windsor, Ontario reflected, “we’ve done some extensive driving on exceptional roads.” Many of the women mentioned how the cars have provided them with the desire and opportunity to travel to new and unexplored places. “I’ve gotten into corners of Wisconsin that I might not have gotten into otherwise,” noted a 69-year-old journalist. While a 45-year-old school counselor doesn’t normally go to Vegas, she remarked that now that she owns a car that is enjoyable to drive, Vegas has become “just something I have to do.” Many of the women proudly referred to accumulated mileage to illustrate how much they enjoy taking their chick cars on road trips. A 46-year-old MINI driver from a small town in Minnesota has nearly doubled her mileage in just over two years of car ownership. A 59-year-old MINI driver from Maryland remarked, “I can honestly say I have never put so much mileage so fast on any car I ever owned.” Good gas mileage is important to
these motorists not only because of the money saved, but also because it allows them to go
further and faster in the pursuit of new automotive adventures and driving experiences.

Many of the women who contributed to this project belong to car clubs as a means to
participate in a variety of organized driving events. The women take part in long distance driving
tours, which take place on “challenging roads with lots of curves,” not only to view scenic back
roads and out of the way places, but to develop and display improved driving skills. The “Tail of
the Dragon” in Deal’s Gap, North Carolina, a two-lane road famous for its 318 curves in an
eleven-mile stretch, is a popular touring destination for this group of chick car owners.

Unaccustomed to thinking of the automobile as a road machine, a number of the women
mentioned how they enjoy preserving these driving moments through journals, scrapbooking,
and online photo albums. A 53-year old accountant, who keeps a photo of her first drive through
the Dragon as computer wallpaper, remarked, “In the picture, I’m coming out of one curve,
setting up for the next, and you can see a third curve in the distance. I have the top down, I’m
wearing a fun hat, and you can my eyes reflected in the rearview mirror. A really cool picture.”
The chick car owners often spoke of the pleasure and excitement of navigating “twisty, fun
roads” on the club driving tours. As a 49-year-old human resources officer remarked of her
participation in the “Italian Job” run in Venice, California, “It’s just so much fun. I’m giggling
the whole time.” Rather than calling on the automobile solely for the performance of everyday
tasks on suburban thoroughfares, chick car drivers find exciting new uses on country highways,
scenic byways, and a multitude of “curvy mountain roads.”

The women also call upon their chick cars for participation in road rallies, high
performance driving events, autocrosses, test drives, driver improvement courses, and track days
at local speedways. They get behind the wheels of Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles to take part
in regional club events such as brewery and cheese tours, scavenger hunts, poker runs, holiday parties, show ‘n shines, parades, and a myriad of social activities. As the 57-year-old owner of a 2008 Galaxy Grey Mica Miata remarked, “we go on quite a few events. And we do it because we enjoy the people. We do it because we enjoy travelling. We do it because we have an affinity with the car.” The women take their chick cars camping, use them to transport rescue animals, feature them in staged photographs in interesting locations, and play “how many people can fit in my chick car.” A 55-year-old Community Services Officer created a photo book for her MINI, which included pictures of the car ready to be scooped by a back hoe, on a nude beach with bathing suits hanging from the car door, being driven by the Chick-Fil-A cow, and looking very tiny next to a live elephant. A 58-year-old technical writer “did the trick photography that every single person got into the back seat of the MINI. And the last guy, he was six foot seven, got into the passenger seat and I opened the sunroof and his head was sticking up out of it.”

Because the chick is car is small, stylish, and unusual, the women who own them are continually thinking of new, imaginative, and fun uses for their respective Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles. And because the chick car is not only serviceable, but incredibly “fun to drive,” the women who own them use at every possible opportunity. As a 22-year-old New Beetle owner remarked, “[I drive it] everywhere. I daily drive it to work; I take it on trips. I really think I spend more time in my car than I do anywhere else.” When asked where she drove her Miata, the 65-year-old owner exclaimed, “Everywhere including snow and gravel roads. Not babied; probably thinks it’s a stylish European mini-pickup truck.” Bad weather does not deter the chick car driver, even those with convertibles. As the owner of a Laguna Blue Miata commented, “I get a kick out of driving on warm winter afternoons with the top down; waving to others usually brings a smile to their faces.” Having spent many years using commuter cars, small SUVs, and
minivans in conventional ways, the women who participated in this project enjoy the creative possibilities of automobile use the chick car offers them. As they call upon their Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles to take part in road trips, road rallies, color tours, parades, autocross, test drives, photo ops, and high performance driving events, they challenge traditional assumptions regarding women’s car use and in doing so, alter the common perception of the woman driver.

**Chick Car Driving Behavior**

As Beth Kraig notes, during the late twentieth century, women drivers as “cautious, timid, and concerned mostly with safe point-to-point passage via straight, wide roadways” was the standard representation in car advertising and popular culture (“Liberated” 388). Driving behavior that exemplified passivity, attention to safety, and strict adherence to traffic regulations was considered appropriate for motorists whose main driving purpose was the transportation of children and the performance of household tasks. As Kraig remarks, “implicit in the image of women as cautious drivers is the suggestion that a woman is perhaps not a truly qualified driver, but she at least knows just enough to avoid potentially dangerous circumstances” (388). The association between the female motorist and motherhood that intensified during the 1980s and 1990s placed the woman behind the wheel in a difficult bind. Women were expected to drive passively yet were simultaneously labeled as inferior drivers for doing so.

Although only half of the chick car drivers who participated in this project have children, nearly all grew up with cultural expectations of motherhood and were instructed to drive accordingly. However, once behind the wheel of a chick car, the women assumed new and emboldening driving behaviors. For as they soon discovered, rather than foster purposeful and passive performances, cars such as the Miata, MINI, and New Beetle – engineered for the sports car enthusiast - promote driving behavior that relies upon driving skill, control, and engagement
with the automobile. Such driving behavior not only provides an alternative and enjoyable automobile experience, but as a gender performance, irrevocably alters the public and personal perception of the woman driver.

The “family vehicle” carries expectations as to how it will be used and driven. The physical properties of a minivan or crossover, as well as the vehicle’s strong association with the safe and efficient transport of children, determine the driving behavior of the woman behind the wheel. The woman driver does not control the vehicle; rather, her driving behavior is regulated by the family car’s wide turning radius, lackluster handling, imprecise steering, underpowered engine, poor gas mileage, weak acceleration, hard suspension, heavier weight, and bumpy ride. The family vehicle’s myriad of safety features – ABS and electronic stability systems, airbags, head restraints, telescoping steering wheel, adjustable pedals, accommodation for multiple child-safety seats, and its big, heavy, and stable presence – constrain the woman driver. However, rather than dictating driving behavior, the chick car, as the women in this project noted, puts the feeling of control back in the driver’s seat. As a 31-year-old system administrator remarked, “my choice of car reflects my desire for control. […] When I drive my Miata I feel safe, powerful, in control, and I have a lot of fun.” Of her Chili Red 2004 MINI Cooper S, a 55-year-old community services officers exclaimed, “driving it makes me feel happy, in control, and safe.” Unlike the family car, used primarily by women for the transport of others, the chick car was produced as a driver’s car. While it is often used as daily transportation, its primary function is to provide the driver with a unique, exhilarating, and enjoyable driving experience. For women who have spent decades driving a pedestrian family vehicle, or have made their way up the professional ladder in a functional economy car, the chick car offers a chance to take control of the car and where it might take them. Attempting to explain the growing popularity of the chick
car among female motorists, a 49-year-old MINI owner remarked, when women “get behind the wheel and they drive it, they go ‘oh.’ Oh, this car, it like, drives. Maybe it gives them a feeling of being in control. And a little bit of feeling of power.”

Being in control requires an engagement with the car. Many of the women in this project noted that driving a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle is not in any way perfunctory; rather, it requires concentration, skill, and a certain amount of moxie. A primary way in which the women engage with the automobile is through insistence on a manual transmission. While less than 7 percent of automobiles sold in the United States have manual transmissions, nearly half of the women who participated made a point of mentioning that they drive cars with stick shifts. Shifting gears, the women asserted, allowed them to focus on driving, feel the road, and more thoroughly enjoy the driving experience. As a 57-year-old from Windsor, Ontario attested, “When you are driving a Miata, you are engaged. You have to watch. You’re not only driving, but you’re shifting.” A 58-year-old technical writer remarked, “I like to be a participant; that’s one reason I don’t like automatics, you don’t feel the road. It’s too much like sitting in your living room.” A 72-year-old retired autocross racer exclaimed, “All my cars have been stick. If you’re going to drive, drive!” Being engaged drivers provided the women with new and more visceral driving experiences, which in turn, increased their driving pleasure. A 59-year-old MINI owner stated, “when I’m driving, I’m very much driving. And also I’m singing at the same time, but I’m very much into what I’m doing.” And as the women suggested, the more enjoyable the driving experience, the more likely they are to become familiar with the cars they drive and to improve their driving skills. They attend driving schools, participate in automotive do-it-yourself sessions offered by local dealerships, and join local car clubs as the means to know and understand their

30 Although manual transmissions are often linked with improved gas mileage, this association was never mentioned by the participants, despite their great interest in economy.
31 Noted in “Driving a Stick Shift? Pros and Cons of Cars with Manual Transmissions” (CarWoo).
cars better. As a 28-year-old textile artist remarked, “I am actively engaged with driving, enjoy it, and enjoy taking care of and learning about my car.”

Rather than consider driving as merely a functional task, the women who participated in this project call upon ownership of a chick car to present themselves as skilled and accomplished drivers. Whether taking the long way home to explore winding country roads, or participating in road rallies and tours on two lane highways renowned for their challenging driving conditions, they use time behind the wheel to test themselves as drivers and have the time of their lives while doing so. Of her drive on the Beartooth Highway, an enthusiastic 57-year-old exclaimed, “it’s a road with a great number of twists and turns; it’s on the edge of a cliff. And it’s really an exciting road to drive, and a ton of fun to drive in a Miata.” Commenting on her improved driving skills, a 59-year-old MINI Clubman owner remarked, “One of my crowning achievements in this car is I made my husband queasy on a run on the Dragon, which is eleven miles long with 318 curves and switchbacks.” With improved driving skills, the women in this project have become more confident as drivers, which is often displayed through aggressive driving.

Aggressive driving is commonly thought of in the context of road rage, excessive speed, disregard for traffic rules and regulations, and general recklessness behind the wheel. It has traditionally been associated with masculinity; as Stephen Bayley writes, to the man behind the wheel, driving fast cars is often an act of recklessness that “demonstrates professional success and suggests sexual prowess” (31). However, the women in this project use aggressiveness to describe a type of driving behavior that displays self-assurance, assertiveness, understanding of the automobile, and considerable skill. Former racecar driver Denise McCluggage argues that the aggressive driver is not reckless, but “enterprising” (61). She channels a natural competitiveness into smart and skillful driving, handling her automobile with confidence, authority, and finesse.
Aggressiveness transforms the act of driving from a duty to be performed into a series of actions that tests the capabilities of the car as well as the individual driving it. Chick cars are not high performance vehicles in the traditional sense; i.e. they do not possess big powerful engines with excessive horsepower. However, they are small, quick, and responsive; such qualities deliver a sensation of speed, and contribute to the reputation of many chick cars as “street legal go-carts.”

As a 26-year-old psychotherapist declared, “I love that I can put my foot down and get somewhere.” A 57-year-old university administrator remarked, “I like to drive, I’m not a speeder, but I like to take off.” The chick car encourages a type of driving behavior that is rarely associated with the woman driver. Rather than passive, overly cautious, and insecure, chick car drivers tend to be assertive, confident, and engaged.

Perhaps that which most epitomizes the driving behavior of the chick car owner is the exuberance with which she takes the wheel. Long relegated to purposed motoring, the women who own Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles have found joy in the simple act of driving. Many expressed how taking off from a stop light, accelerating past other cars, or banking a sharp turn in a chick car has the ability to alleviate the stress of a bad day at work or problems at home. A 61-year-old dental office manager exclaimed, “I can be down in the dumps, and I can get in that car, and crank up the music and take off and just head down the road and the world becomes a brand new place after that.” A 22-year-old New Beetle owner confessed, “With my car, I enjoy every minute I spend on the road.” Of her 2006 Miata, a 53-year-old accountant remarked, “Driving with the top down is exhilarating. It’s fun to cruise along with the wind blowing through my hair, the sun on my face. It puts me in a good mood.” In a chick car, driving is not looked upon with resignation, but with eagerness and anticipation. Women’s driving behavior
behind the wheel of a chick car – engaged, aggressive, skillful and joyful – asks for a new consideration of the woman driver.

The women who participated in this project were quick to point out they do not consider themselves women drivers in the traditional, stereotypical sense of the term. As a 57-year-old Miata owner remarked, woman driver “is a derogatory term for women who drive and I don’t like it.” Others suggest that the term is often used to describe women who are “timid while driving, or unsure of themselves.” While they agree that popular stereotypes of the woman driver are not altogether accurate, they do feel that many women lack the automotive knowledge and affinity with the car necessary to be effective and proficient drivers. Although women who text and use cell phones were high on the stereotypical woman driver list, those who received the largest amount of criticism for driving behavior were moms in minivans. Women with kids in the car, stated many chick car owners, are often so distracted by children’s antics that they put themselves, and everyone else on the road, in danger. A 47-year-old office administrator surmised that mothers “are either distracted with the kids or speeding a million miles and hour to get to some PTA meeting or soccer practice.” Mothers have more distractions because, as a 55-year-old occupational therapist remarked, “they are usually hauling precious cargo and are multitasking in their minds.” Many of the women were once in the position of those they criticize; as a 57-year-old MINI driver confessed, “The only car accident I’ve had in the last God knows how many years was because I had two kids screaming at me in the car.” Many were also quick to note that gender does not preclude bad driving; male drivers were often admonished for risky driving behavior. A 31-year-old systems administrator noted, “I think we make the mistake of mistaking sex or gender when the actual reason for poor driving is lack of caring.” The women in this project called upon their own performances as skilled, informed, aggressive, and
engaged drivers to distance themselves from distracted teenagers, soccer moms in minivans, disinterested women, and dangerous men. In doing so, they offered an alternative, and legitimate, construction of the woman driver.

Donatelli argues that the minivan, introduced in 1984, became a “crucial social-cultural site for the ‘performativity’ of ‘family values’ (88). Marketing for the minivan, which placed women in the driver’s seat of “a family room on wheels” (Williams) effectively reinstated domesticity as a female regime. Driving a family vehicle was considered a normative gender performance. It was an act, as Judith Butler might argue, expressive of a core gender identity.

While the women in the project do not identify as typical woman drivers, they view their own driving habits as representative of the kind of drivers women ought to be. And although many compared their driving acumen to that of men as a way to quantify driving ability and construct themselves as equal behind the wheel, they did not frame their actions as masculine. If, as Butler contends, gender is continually enacted and performed, “it is possible for individuals to alter their performances in ways that might subvert the heterosexist norms that govern its very production” (Allen 67). It could be argued, therefore, that chick car drivers, through determined car choice, car use, and driving behavior, alter the cultural norms that have prescribed what women should drive, and the type of driving in which they should engage. If, as automakers and marketers want us to believe, driving is always and everywhere a gender performance, then the appropriation of a category of quick, responsive, small, and fun to drive automobiles by a group of chicks has the ability to change the cultural perception of the woman driver. Through a little bit of gender trouble, the participants in this project have not only altered the socially assigned gender performances of the woman driver, but have also expanded and reimagined them.

32 While heterosexism is usually considered in the context of discrimination against members of the LGBT community, as applied to this discussion of women in car culture, it may be more broadly defined as “oppression created through the enforcement of gender norms and roles” (Ellison).
The Chick Car and Meaning Making

In his introduction to *Car Cultures*, Daniel Miller notes that while there is an impressive amount of scholarship devoted to the automobile in history, there is considerably less focused on the relationship between individuals and cars. Even within social history, Miller writes, “there tends to be an emphasis on the consequences of the car rather than an empathetic account of car consumption in particular cultural contexts” (8). Feminist historians Virginia Scharff, Georgine Clarsen, and Margaret Walsh have made significant gains in this area. Calling upon available primary sources, they have reconstructed women’s various relationships to the automobile over time, and have attempted to extrapolate the varied meanings attributed to cars by the women who drove them. The work of these scholars intimates that women’s relationship to the automobile is more complicated than traditional automotive accounts might have us believe. It collectively calls upon historical and cultural sources to connect women’s automobile use to the meanings of cars in women’s lives.

The responses from the women in this project add credence to the notion –articulated by Scharff, Clarsen, and Walsh – that cars hold multiple meanings for the women who own and drive them. Through ownership of a chick car and participation in chick car culture, women have the opportunity to change the meaning of an automobile from a mode of transportation to a material object of significance to their daily lives. As Vannini asserts, “the process of objectification helps to reveal how material forms are the media for the generation, reproduction, and transformation of sociality” (23). Thus to this particular group of women, the chick car is valued not only as a means to get from point A to point B, but also for what it allows them to do, what it encourages them to become, and how it provides them with the opportunity to irrevocably change car culture and the role of the woman driver within it. In the driver’s seat of a
chick car, these women become empowered through the acquisition of automotive knowledge, attainment of advanced driving skills, access to new experiences, participation in automotive and social networks, and formation of new subjectivities. As these chick car drivers ascribe new meanings to the automobile through individual and collective automotive experiences, they successfully and enthusiastically reimagine the woman driver in their own image.

*The Chick Car as a Means to Automotive Knowledge*

The woman driver is often perceived as an individual who, while valuing the automobile for its practical applications, does not know very much about cars. As popular representations suggest, she does not understand how a car operates, how to maintain her own vehicle, or what to do when something goes awry. Her lack of automotive knowledge puts her at a disadvantage when dealing with auto dealers or service personnel, places her in danger when faced with a flat tire or mechanical difficulties on the side of the road, and ensures that her driving experience will be primarily passive and perfunctory. While this description can be applied to drivers of either gender, in American car culture it is most often applied to women behind the wheel. As Wajcman notes, “The absence of technical confidence or competence does indeed become part of feminine gender identity, as well as being a sexual stereotype” (155).

Through car choice, car use, and driving behavior, the chick car owners who contributed to this project established themselves as atypical woman drivers. As a 28-year-old textile artist remarked, “I think many people do not expect me to be as interested in cars as I am. So, when they learn this about me, perhaps they then don’t assume I am the typical woman driver.” A 32-year-old space planner prides herself as being “an educated driver who likes cars and knows what she’s looking at.” What also sets chick car drivers apart from the common stereotype is the importance they attribute to automotive knowledge. The women who participated in this project
viewed the acquisition of automotive knowledge as both a benefit and requirement of chick car ownership. Whether they entered chick car culture with a longstanding interest in cars, or called upon chick car ownership to further their automotive education, knowledge about the automobile was considered crucial to their identities as intelligent, informed, and skilled drivers.

In their study of masculine and feminine automotive behaviors, Smart et al conclude, “Traditionally, men have been more exposed to automotive technology and have been educated about such functions. Women’s liberation and emancipation have contributed to increased female interest in activities previously considered largely within the male domain.” Many of the women in this project came to the chick car with an existing interest in cars, often acquired through relationships with male friends and family members. “I feel like I have learned a lot about cars from my dad and brother, too,” asserted a 23-year-old MINI owner. “I know how to handle certain situations if they arise.” A 40-year-old sales associate remarked, “my first boyfriend was into cars and spending time with him just made me get interested in cars.”

Growing up in an area with a strong car culture or playing with “toys that move” during childhood also impacted women’s automotive interest. A 32-year-old space planner and auto enthusiast revealed she had a collection of over 300 Hot Wheels growing up; a 26-year-old psychotherapist noted, “I had a go-kart when I was young and a few battery powered Power Wheels before that.” And as a 53-year-old native Detroiter exclaimed, “I sort of think that if you grew up in Michigan in the muscle car era of the 70s, cars are part of your DNA.”

An established interest in cars led many of the women in this project to seek the unique automotive experience provided by a chick car. They appreciated the performance, handling, sound mechanics, and smiles-per-miles the small, sporty, and responsive vehicles offered. Many had prior experience working on cars so understood what they had and how to use it. The 29-
year-old owner of a New Beetle Turbo remarked, “The mechanics fascinate me which is why I do a lot of my own maintenance and repair work. I am definitely ‘bug-crazy’ and read everything I can about them.” Those with less previous car exposure often used the opportunity of independence – from mom and dad, marriage, or a minivan - to catch up on their automotive edification. A 56-year-old program coordinator developed a new interest in cars, as she remarked, “Once I was on my own after my divorce.” A 62-year-old Miata driver waited “until the early nineties, when I had more money” to think about getting a car of her own choosing. Many of the participants, after taking ownership of a chick car, made it a priority to learn all they could about it in order to experience it more fully. A 49-year-old charity volunteer exclaimed, “Never [had] an interest in cars until I bought the MINI. Opened up a new, huge world.” Women who had gone through most of their adult life without really understanding the mechanics of cars suddenly started working on their own. As a 56-year-old MINI owner asserted, “I do all that I can. The oil has only been changed by me. I just replaced the back brakes and rotors. I put a cold air filter on it within the first month of purchasing.” A 53-year-old accountant exclaimed, “Last year, with the assistance of fellow Miata club members, I learned how to change the brake pads. This year I installed a new horn. I’ve also installed a cable for a CB radio, feeding the cable into the cabin of the car through an opening from the trunk.” Carol Sanger suggests that women who mechanically “know” their cars begin to see them differently; they not only experience the “pleasure and accomplish of repair” but begin to achieve satisfaction and success with their cars as well (705). As many of the women indicated, “knowing the car” can lead to increased confidence as drivers and a stronger connection to the automobile.

Whether they came to the chick car with a prior interest in automobiles, or were eager to become better informed upon purchase of a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle, the acquisition of
automotive knowledge was extremely valuable to this group of women drivers. Consequently, they took advantage of numerous opportunities to increase their knowledge of cars. They visited online car forums for technical advice about specific problems, driving tips, recommendations on dealerships, parts suppliers and repair establishments, and general information about a make or model when contemplating a purchase. They “liked” Facebook car group pages in order to share automobile experiences, ask questions, look for parts or products, find out more about their cars, learn about upcoming events, and catch up on issues and updates pertaining to particular models. They participated in local and regional car organizations to take advantage of dealer DIY events, club “detailing” days, and the expertise and experience of other chick car drivers. These learning activities provided chick car owners with the resources to make informed and intelligent car choices, offered them the ammunition to negotiate with automotive dealers, service establishments, and repair personnel, increased the enjoyment of the automotive experience, and in the process, empowered them as car consumers and drivers.

The anxiety over the labeling of some automobiles as “chick cars” by marketers and the media is not due to a concern over the vehicle’s technology, but rather, the fear that women’s use of it will create the impression that it is not a true driver’s car and will therefore repel the male buyer. As Tanya Barrientos of the Seattle Times writes, “For women, these cars represent fun, freedom, and funkiness. But when a car gets labeled feminine, men tend to shun it.” The women who participated in this project understand that possession of a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle indicates the owner is not only knowledgeable about cars, but has a different relationship to the automobile than the average driver. A 26-year-old MINI owner asserted, “I probably don’t fit the stereotypical view of a woman driver because I care about my car’s mechanical state.” Women who own chick cars, remarked a 61-year-old office assistant, “tend to pay a little more attention
to their car. They know more about the car, they know about the workings of the car, their engines.” As the responses of the women in this project suggest, ownership of a chick car has the ability to alter the common perception of a woman driver from passive, mechanically inept, and uniformed to skilled, knowledgeable, and car savvy. In turn, women’s appropriation of the chick car changes its meaning from a quick, responsive, and sporty vehicle intended for male consumption to an affordable, nimble, and fun-to-drive automobile available to anyone with the knowledge and know-how to appreciate an enjoyable and rewarding automotive experience.

*The Chick Car as a Means to New Driving Skills*

During the 1980s, Kraig notes in “The Liberated Lady Driver,” automakers were reluctant to promote the power or performance attributes of cars to women. It was assumed that women were not concerned with qualities that reflected driving skill since they did not possess the ability to handle a car appropriately under “challenging” conditions. Although research demonstrated that women were safer drivers than their male counterparts, safe driving – due to its association with the woman driver - was not considered indicative of driving expertise or skill. Rather, skilled driving was often linked to risk taking behind the wheel, as an indicator of masculinity and men’s superior driving ability. While women today continue to be concerned about safety, chick car owners often view it differently. Safe driving, they suggest, is not accomplished via passive driving habits, but rather through the attainment and practice of superior driving skills. Skilled driving allows the woman driver to approach challenging conditions with confidence and conviction rather than caution. Skilled driving includes understanding what the car can do, taking advantage of the technology the car has to offer, and gaining mastery over the automobile. For this particular group of women, the chick car provided the technology, impetus, and opportunity to become skilled, proficient, and engaged drivers.
Many of the women came to chick car ownership as accomplished drivers, and used the opportunity to drive a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle as the means to hone, improve, and demonstrate their considerable driving skills. Others, who were accustomed to more pedestrian vehicles, were pleasantly surprised at the automotive experience the chick car offered. These women endeavored to improve their driving abilities in order to enjoy and appreciate the chick car more fully. Whether they entered chick car ownership with a solid set of driving skills or viewed it as an opportunity to become more competent drivers, the women who participated in this project considered driving skill as key to taking control of the car. As the owner of a 2010 Red Rock Edition New Beetle asserted, “I am able to drive my car and not let it drive me.”

Carol Sanger writes, “for many women, cars have served less as an escape from domestic duties than as a technologically enhanced form of domestic obligation” (709). In this context, the car is not a driving machine, but rather, a tool used primarily in the service of others. For most women, driving “skill” was thus equated with the fulfillment of the necessary requirements for the procurement of a driver’s license rather than the ability to effectively corner, downshift, and accelerate. “Most women don’t look for performance in a car,” noted a 22-year-old New Beetle owner. “Most women look at purpose, like hauling clients, hauling kids, comfort on long trips [and] gas mileage.” Many of the women spent a good part of their lives driving functional vehicles that did not demand any specialized driving skills. If there was a “serious” car in the household, it was usually in the possession of a male driver.

For the majority of participants in this project, the chick car offered a new type of driving experience, one based on fun rather than function. In order to appreciate and take advantage of what the chick car had to offer, women sought to improve or perfect existing driving skills. Thus they often enrolled in driving courses and participated in events to test their driving ability. Many
joined local car clubs as a way to learn from more experienced drivers and to practice what they’ve learned on club road trips replete with switchbacks and “twisties.” Acquiring such skills not only resulted in improved driving, but also promoted a connection to the car and increased women’s driving pleasure. A 43-year-old Texas homemaker noted that women who own chick cars tend to be better drivers than those who drive SUVs; as she asserted, “I think they really love driving their MINIs, so they become more in tune with their cars and want to learn to be better drivers.” A 43-year-old realtor feels more connected to her chick car and more confident driving it than past vehicles. As she remarked, “I think this is partly the result of the performance class that I took to learn how to better handle my MINI.” Many take their skills even further, and participate in track days on local speedways, auto cross events, and competitive racing. A 45-year-old Skip Barber Racing School graduate remarked, “I could race, competitively if I wanted to. I have all the skills of a racer like heel-toe, trail braking, and passing safely.” A 24-year-old graduate student added, “I race for fun, not to win, although I’m quite happy with my progress over the past few years.” Some of the more experienced chick car owners organize such events in order to encourage other women to test their driving ability and gain confidence as drivers. “I’ve been running the autocross now for probably eight years,” announced a 50-year-old administrative assistant. “And we’re probably one of the best autocross groups in the region as far as, we make sure that everyone gets lots of runs.”

The women in this project viewed the attainment of improved driving skills as an accomplishment, and spoke about their performance behind the wheel with considerable pride. A 59-year-old receptionist stated, “I have some pretty good driving skills in this car! I would also like to do autocross some day as I think I would be good at it.” “I took a driving course out in East Texas, a driver’s education course,” exclaimed a 54-year-old legal assistant. “And I won the
highway driving with the fastest time of one minute and one second. So I was really excited about that.” Many understand that being female in car culture often marks them as incompetent or unskilled, and enjoy the opportunity to prove the doubters wrong. As the 65-year-old owner of a Laguna Blue Miata remarked, “Men with limited life experience may think women don’t enjoy driving, can’t park a car, can’t use a manual transmission, [or] can’t read a map. But in the real world it’s not about gender, just what a culture imposes on both its males and females.” The 57-year-owner of a 2008 Miata added, “I think there’s a mystique about driving a sports car. And I think it has, there’s a macho-ness that men feel I think when they can drive a sports car. And I think to see a woman on equal footing is empowering.” The women often cited their own driving ability as a way dispel the common notion that women aren’t skilled drivers and are incapable of appreciating and enjoying the driving experience. While they recognized that not all women feel the same about cars as they do, they also emphasized repeatedly that all women have the opportunity to become engaged with cars and better appreciate the driving experience by purchasing the right vehicle and acquiring the necessary driving skills to master it. They consider themselves fortunate to have the resources and opportunity to purchase cars of their own choosing, and actively seek the skills necessary to make the car owning experience as exciting, rewarding, and enjoyable as possible.

To the woman who owns one, the chick car is not a merely a means of transport, but a vehicle that opens her to new sensations, emotions, and experiences. Chick car owners love the automobile not only for its styling and appearance, but also for its responsiveness, acceleration, and what car aficionados refer to as “feed back.” They endeavor to experience the feel of the road through their hands on the steering wheel and by the seat of their pants, or skirts, as the case may be. Rather than define the driving experience in terms of economy, practicality and
functionality, chick car drivers describe it with words like “rush,” “high” and “fun.” As the responses of these women indicate, the acquisition of driving skills transforms an automobile’s meaning from a household technology to a source of fun, adventure, and empowerment. It changes driving from a duty to an act of pleasure. Vannini writes, “through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting, and living with things, people make themselves in the process” (23). A 31-year-old Miata owner put it more succinctly: “My car is my most prized possession. It is not only my transportation to and from work, it's also entertainment, and it's a tool to increase my driving skill and knowledge and maybe just win a few autocrosses, too.”

The Chick Car as a Means to Automotive and Social Networks

Early women drivers, while certainly appreciative of the automobile as a means of accessible and affordable transportation, were quick to recognize its life changing potential. As Scharff writes, “automobility, to the diverse women who sought its power, meant access to a wider social life, new possibilities in where and how to live, new leisure practices, new goods and information” (“Wheel” 171). Nearly one hundred years later, women have embraced the chick car for reasons that are remarkably similar to those of their twentieth-century sisters. They value their Miatas, MINIs, and New Beetles not only for how they perform, but also for the experiences and connections the cars make possible. Through participation in chick car culture, women are granted access to a myriad of automotive and social networks. Chick car owners rely on these networks not only to acquire automotive knowledge, but also to share automotive interests with fellow auto enthusiasts, publicize and participate in automotive events, develop new friendships and social groups, seek automotive resources, travel to unfamiliar places, perform charitable work, strengthen relationships, and improve communities.
The majority of women who contributed to this project are members of regional or national organizations. Those whose geographical location makes it difficult to physically participate stay active through subscriptions to automobile mailing lists, forums, Facebook pages, and car club websites. A 55-year-old legal assistant views the online forum as a place “to see if anyone has had the same issues with their car, [receive] support from fellow MINI owners, [and learn about] discounts on MINI things.” Many of the women come to chick car culture without extensive automotive experience or knowledge. Car groups – physical and virtual - provide safe, welcoming environments for women to learn more about their cars, receive help when needed, nurture their automotive interests, and ask questions without fear of embarrassment or ostracism. A 23-year-old New Beetle owner considers her local club and online forum as “endless sources for help and a shoulder to cry on.” While the online group “The Mini Skirts” attracts primarily female chick car owners, the overwhelming majority of Miata, MINI, and New Beetle clubs, forums, and Facebook pages have both male and female participants. Within each group participants demonstrate a wide range of automotive experience and expertise, with most members willing if not eager to share what they know and to help others with particular car problems. As a 49-year-old human resource manager said of her MINI group, “everybody is willing to take the time to talk about it, to help you out. To steer you in a direction.” The women recognize that men as a group, through socialization and life experiences, are more likely to be more familiar with cars, and often rely upon them as auto educators. A 42-year-old psychotherapist noted that men in car clubs respect women who are “very into their cars” and like that they can share this interest with women. A 32-year-old interior designer remarked, “the guys that are particularly good at wrenching are more than happy to lend a hand, and never get impatient with any of us girls who want to learn more.” As the women in this
project indicated, once they become comfortable with their own cars they are likely to “pay it forward,” through acting as online group administrators, recruiting new members, or assisting those who may need a referral for parts or car repair.

Clubs and online forums are also a source of information for local and national automotive related events, which include road trips, road rallies, car shows, and track days at local speedways. Many women mentioned that besides testing their driving ability participation in these activities allowed them to do things, visit places, and experience parts of the country they would not have otherwise. As a 65-year-old Miata owner disclosed, club membership provided “information I probably would not have found on my own. Activities I probably would not have searched out and tried on my own.” While many of the women participate in clubs and events individually, others call upon club membership as a way to share an activity and love of cars with significant others, or, as a 55-year-old MINI owner remarked, “getting my husband going places that he probably would not go if we were not going with other people.”

While women’s participation in various chick car cultures is dependent on the cars they drive, the women who contributed to this project consider the social connections to other chick car drivers as an integral and important component of chick car ownership. Women often experience an instant camaraderie with fellow chick car owners; when you see other MINI drivers on the road, noted a 57-year-old university administrator, “they honk, they beep, they wave.” Events organized by local car clubs provide a nonthreatening environment for casual conversation and easy friendships. As the women who participated in this project indicated, despite differences in class, race, or sexual orientation among chick car owners, a common interest in cars is usually all that is necessary to be accepted into chick car organizations. Of her car group, a 69-year-old journalist remarked, “they’re a different demographic than my husband
and I. It’s more blue collar. […] But they’re as much fun as everyone else.” Meeting new people and making new friends were repeatedly cited as important benefits of participating in chick car culture. To a 49-year-old charity volunteer, having a chick car means “driving is never a bad thing. It means social life and smiles.” Chick car activities were also viewed as a way to find folks with a common interest after a life-changing event such as a new marriage, retirement, or move to a new location. Many of the women view chick car culture as an extended family of sorts, and often call on other members for support, advice, and friendship. As a 49-year-old human resources manager attested, “I like the camaraderie, I like the just people coming together; they have a common interest. There seems to be people out there who just want to help others and this is kind of their way to do that.”

Access to automotive and social networks also provided chick car owners with the opportunity to help others through charitable work. Many cited participation in car club events that sponsored charities or enriched neighborhoods as an important component of chick car ownership. As a 65-year-old Miata owner remarked, automotive networks such as car clubs offer “another way to volunteer to improve one’s locality, such as hosting ’driver improvement’ workshops or cooperating in local charity fundraisers.” While the women who participated in this project are overwhelmingly effusive about the cars they drive, they consider the chick car as more than an enjoyable means of transport. Ownership of a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle provides them with access to automotive and social networks heretofore unavailable to them, which in turn enriches their automotive experience and positively affects their lives. Through their participation in chick car culture these women, as Georgine Clarsen might argue, provide new meanings and human contexts for the cars they drive, generating “unexpected and heterogeneous ways of moving and connecting to others across distances” (“Mobility” 237).
To the women who participated in this project, the chick car is not a mere means of transportation; rather, they often consider it an extension of themselves. Marsh and Collett suggest the automobile often serves as a reflection of the individual who drives it. They write, “the automobile satisfies not only our practical needs, but the need to declare ourselves socially and individually” (5). The majority of chick car respondents spent a good portion of their lives driving vehicles that unmistakably identified them as wives and mothers. While they recognize and value that designation, most have reached a point in their lives in which they desire to redefine themselves outside the familiar constructs of work, home, and family. They consider the chick car as an effective and meaningful way to project this new identity. As a 63-year-old administrative supervisor noted, “I think probably at the time that I went back to work back in the 80s, when my son went to school, I decided that I was going to let my car reflect a little bit more of who I was.” Explained a 47-year-old accounting clerk, if looking at the car folks conclude that, “I’m not a soccer mom, that would be OK with me.”

Hazleton writes, “for most of us, a car’s identity is a mix of both the car itself and the driver” (16). As was oft repeated by the women in this project, “My car is me.” These women chose chick cars as a means to complement, enhance, or bring attention to the characteristics they value in themselves. Many called upon shared physical and personality traits to describe themselves and the cars they drive. A 42-year-old MINI driver remarked, “It is fun, quirky, and people smile when they see it. I feel fun, quirky and I smile when I drive it.” Of her Miata, a 53-year-old accountant declared, “I guess it reflects me because we are both fun and adventurous. It’s an external expression of my fun loving self.” A 54-year-old technical assistant stated, “I’m fairly outgoing, fairly bubbly, [and] love to have fun. Like my car.” A 71-year-old musician
believes her chick car signals to others that she is “a free spirit, unconventional, doing my own thing, and perhaps, ‘don’t mess with me’.” When linking themselves to their automobiles, chick car drivers used terms such as “sporty,” “sassy,” “sexy,” “stylish,” and “free spirited.” They often compared their own small stature to the vehicle’s proportions to form a connection to the car, as well as to assert that something diminutive can be also be strong. “I think of MINI as a plucky little car who is up for anything,” remarked a 26-year-old from Wisconsin. “That reflects me too because I’m only five foot tall and a woman but feel as though that has never stopped me from doing what I want.” Of her New Beetle turbo, a 29-year-old CPA exclaimed, “I feel cute and powerful when I drive it.”

As Marsh and Collett note, “individuals relate to their cars in many different ways, using them to make a variety of statements about themselves” (25). Empty nesters often call upon the chick car to demonstrate that while they may be getting older, they still have a zest for life. As a MINI-driving receptionist exclaimed, “I am a very young at heart 59-year-old grandmother of five.” A 59-year-old telecommunications engineer declared, “This car makes me feel younger than I am. I don’t feel old, especially when I drive this car, top down, accelerating past most other vehicles. I feel it is part of my identity – I am defying the stereotypes of my age group.”

The chick car – small, quick, sporty, and available in colors other than black33 - draws a good amount of attention to itself and the woman who drives it. While many of the women drive a chick car as a means to reflect their natural gregariousness, others use the Miata, MINI, or New Beetle to project personality traits that they don’t necessarily have, but hope to attain. Of her “mellow yellow” MINI Cooper with black racing stripes, a 49-year-old unemployment benefit specialist remarked, “It makes me more personable. Strangers will approach me and ask me

33 Regarding the Model T, Henry Ford has long been quoted as saying buyers “could paint it any color so long as it's black” (“The Model T”).
about it.” A 47-year-old office administrator noted, “I hope [others] look at me and my car and think, ‘wow, she likes to have fun and she’s outgoing’.” When speaking of the reaction of friends and co-workers to her 2011 MINI, a 57-year-old university administrator disclosed, “They probably don’t think I’m as conservative as I am when I drive it.”

While the women in this project used terms such as “cute,” “quirky,” “happy-go-lucky,” and “fun,” to link themselves to the cars they drive, the term repeated most frequently was “unique.” The size, retro style, paint color, accessories, and low production volume of vehicles such as the Miata, MINI, and New Beetle place them in a category easily distinguishable from the more commonplace sedans, crossovers, minivans, and SUVs on the road. Of her 2007 MINI, a 28-year-old textile artist remarked, “I wanted a car that was unique and would stand out. I wanted a car that matches my personality.” A 45-year-old tech teacher declared, “As I’ve been told, my car is as unique as I am.” However, the description of themselves and their cars as “unique” also reflects an inherent understanding of woman’s place in car culture. As Martin Wachs remarks, “in order to preserve the boundaries between men’s and women’s spheres, it was increasingly asserted that women lacked interest in or aptitude from mechanical devices, and this stereotype became especially well developed with respect to the automobile” (“Automobile” 105). Women who differ from this common stereotype often consider themselves as oddities or outsiders. A 45-year-old tech teacher notes, “I am always having to fight the stigma of being female and a car enthusiast.” They are “unique” because they defy the cultural stereotypes and perceptions of female drivers. As a 31-year-old Miata driver explained, “I am seen, being a woman, as not particularly interested or capable with cars, and yet am a performance driving instructor, am extremely capable with car control, [and] am able to do some work on the cars myself.” However, while most women believe their preoccupation with the automobile marks
them as outsiders, many revel in their “difference,” and enjoy being the woman in the room or on the road who can talk knowledgeably and passionately about cars.

The automobile, notes Kathleen Franz, has provided fertile ground for personal and community expression. She writes, “consumers used the automobile to promote their own agendas, reshaping the machine to fit their needs and desires” (“Automobiles” 53). To the chick car owner, this is often accomplished through personalization of the automobile. As Bob Hall, the “father of the Miata”, asserts, “the final designer of the car is the buyer” (Automobile magazine). The Miata, Hall explains, was conceived as a blank canvas, so that the owner can do “whatever he [or she] wants with it” (Automobile magazine). The MINI website notes there are over 10 million ways to configure their automobile, so that each car produced will reflect the unique personality of its owner. Many chick owners called upon color selection, options, after market accessories, and unique paint treatments to make their cars their own. As a 43-year-old homemaker revealed she added “some bits under the hood to make him faster and he’s getting new exhaust to make him sound meaner.” Women also named their cars; they used monikers such as “Tomboy,” “Giggles,” “Donovan,” “Blaze,” “Vroom Vroom,” and “MINI Pearl” to describe the car and the woman behind the wheel. The personalization of the chick car not only provides the opportunity for each woman to project her own distinct identity, but also brings attention to how the chick car expands, rather than limits, the categories of woman and driver.

The majority of participants have either spent a good portion of their lives driving vehicles that defined them as mothers and caretakers, or anticipate doing so in the future. While they embrace these roles, they also understand such cultural constructs can be limiting, often masking if not obliterating other facets of identity. Driving a chick car provides these women with the opportunity to project a new and sometimes unexpected version of themselves. It
suggests that rather than practical, cautious, and conservative, a woman driving a Miata, MINI, or New Beetle is fun loving, spirited, adventurous, and young at heart. The women who drive chick cars knowingly and enthusiastically disrupt the woman driver stereotype and replace it with identities of their own making. In doing so, they become empowered as women drivers.

Vannini writes, the “identity and subjectivity of women have been shaped by technological choices that reinforced existing binary gender oppositions and dominant sexist hierarchies” (19). While the rationale behind the gendering of the automobile was, ostensibly, to broaden the automotive market and thereby sell more cars, the intention was also to irrevocably link men’s and women’s automobile use to traditional gender roles. This gendered division was applied not only to considerations of car choice, car use, and driving behavior, but also to the meanings men and women ascribed to the automobile. Whereas men were expected to value the automobile for its ability to confer masculinity, status, and power on the driver, the car’s meaning for women was centered on functionality. Because automotive culture has traditionally been considered from the perspective of the white male, it is assumed that women who drive what men drive do so for the same reasons. Therefore, when women develop an interest in vehicles intended for the male market, they are admonished as technologically suspect, questioned about their femininity, and berated as women drivers. What critics of the women ‘outliers’ fail to recognize is that the meanings women ascribe to automobiles differ considerably from those of men. And those meanings, while different, have equal value.

Automotive scholars have long associated men’s love of cars with power. In advertising, media, and popular culture, the automobile’s power, technological superiority, and performance are often conflated with the man who drives it. Women are also interested in power. But it is power of a different sort. “Women know where the real power is,” Hazleton writes. “Power is
not in the numbers, or even in the performance, but in the sense of control and independence” (21). The women who contributed to this project view possession of a chick car as empowering. It provides them with the opportunity to become more confident, capable, and engaged drivers through the acquisition of automotive knowledge and superior driving skills. It promotes participation in community and car culture through access to automotive and social networks. It allows them to express facets of their identities in new and often unexpected ways. As Vannini notes, technology is never in the things themselves, but rather “in the process whereby all those entities interact and give form and content to our world” (4). Through active engagement in chick car culture, the women in this project created new meanings for the automobile. And in doing so, they successfully and indelibly altered the perception of the woman driver.

The Chick Car and the Woman Driver

In her work in transportation studies, Sheller argues that debates about the future of the car and road system will remain superficial - and policies ineffectual - until they take into consideration the emotional investments people have in the relationships between the car, the self, family, and friends. As Sheller writes, “car consumption is never simply about rational economic choices, but is as much about aesthetic, emotional, and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation, and work” (222). The historical practice of considering women’s automotive consumption primarily in functional and familial terms obscures women’s varied relationships to cars. In particular, it ignores what Sheller refers to as “automotive emotions” – the embodied dispositions of car users and the feelings associated with car use. The familiar focus on the functionality of women’s car experience supposes that women’s emotional needs in automotive use are met through the car’s role in the safe transport of herself and family members.
The women who participated in this project have, at some point in their lives, experienced limited automotive options. Whether starting out with a career, a family, or both, finances and family often dictated women’s relationship with the car. However, these women are now at the point in their lives – personally and professionally – where they have the opportunity to make their own automotive choices. No longer constrained by gendered notions of automobility, they have embraced the technology of a certain type of car and have used their newly acquired spending power to make it their own. Through personal vehicle choice, innovative car use, and unexpected driving behavior chick car drivers disrupt the historical gendering of the automotive experience. Through the acquisition of automotive knowledge, attainment of advanced driving skills, engagement in new automotive experiences, and participation in automotive and social networks, they create new subjectivities as empowered women drivers. Through “automotive emotions,” they form new connections with cars, ascribe new meanings to the automotive experience, and perform gender in new and unanticipated ways.

The appropriation of the chick car by a growing population of car savvy, young-at-heart female motorists asks for a reconsideration of the “woman driver.” The Miata, MINI, and New Beetle “chicks” who contributed to this project challenge cultural notions of what a woman should drive, to what purpose women’s driving should take, and the type of performance expected from women behind the wheel. As Catherine Belsey suggests, to “reproduce existing meanings exactly is to reaffirm the knowledges our culture takes for granted” (4). Rejecting the historical dichotomy between masculine and feminine within the automotive industry and the world at large, these women have inscribed new meanings to a particular category of car and in the process, have reinvented themselves as woman drivers.
Figure 4. A sample of chic cars owned by participants.
CHAPTER 4: THE CLASSIC MUSCLE CAR

Muscle Men to Fast Women

Between 1964 and 1973, the muscle car emerged as a “dominant icon in car culture America” (Heitmann 177). Though a serendipitous intersection of circumstances – post World War II prosperity, baby boomer youth culture, illegal street racing, and young auto execs poised for greatness – the muscle car was produced and introduced to great acclaim and unanticipated success. Most commonly defined as an American two-door, rear-wheel-drive, mid-size car equipped with a large, muscular V8 engine and sold at an affordable price, the muscle car was inspired by the young working-class men who congregated in Detroit neighborhoods to engage in illegal street racing. As auto historian John Heitmann notes, the muscle car became the vehicle of choice for male baby boomers of driving age with “money in their pockets looking for excitement” (17). The 1964 Pontiac GTO, the brainchild of young GM executive John DeLorean, is often recognized as the original muscle car. The enormous success of DeLorean’s GTO inspired other automakers to quickly follow suit, with offerings that included the Dodge Charger, Plymouth Roadrunner and Chevrolet Chevelle. In order to take advantage of the muscle car phenomenon, automakers expanded the category to include beefed up pony cars34 such as the Ford Mustang, Chevy Camaro, Dodge Challenger, and Plymouth Roadrunner, as well as full-sized cars and compacts packed with massive engines. “Earsplitting and shamelessly macho,” writes auto journalist Lawrence Ulrich, these “power-crazed machines” came laden with hood scoops, racing stripes, and shiny mag wheels, and were available in a variety of high impact colors such as Panther Pink, Grabber Blue, Plum Crazy, and Top Banana (“Plymouth”). By the

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34 The Ford Mustang– the original pony car- was introduced in 1964 shortly after the Pontiac GTO. Initially marketed as a stylish, sporty, and fun-to-drive car, performance packages were added to certain models (GT, Mach 1, Boss) in order to compete in the growing muscle car market. As Leffingwell writes, “Pony cars proved to be even more acceptable because they made muscle cars acceptable, turning them into vehicles their owners could drive to work through the week, to the market on Saturday morning, and to the drag strip or movies on Saturday night” (37).
mid 1960s, Detroit area streets were rumbling with the loud, powerful, colorful, and relatively inexpensive automobiles that, as auto historian Mark Foster exclaims, “reeked attitude!” (76).

The enthusiastic response of male teenage drivers to the American muscle car was often echoed by the adult male automotive press. John Campisano, former editor-in-chief of Muscle Cars magazine, exclaimed, “Muscle cars are about screaming big blocks revving to the redline. They’re about full-throttle power-shifts at the drags. […] They’re about cruising on a warm summer night with your buddies or special someone” (8). Automobile magazine founder David E. Davis depicted the muscle car driving experience as “losing your virginity, going into combat, and tasting your first beer all in about seven seconds” (qtd. in Mueller 17). Male automotive scholars reacted in a similar fashion. Writes Heitmann, “with a standard 325 horsepower engine, optional tri-power performance, and a Hurst 4-speed, this light, fast, and inexpensive car resulted in a thrill with every ride” (177). As such reviews suggest, the muscle car was the perfect vehicle, both literally and figuratively, for a coming-of-age male market “with discretionary cash and an urge to express their rebellious identity through the automobile” (Gartman 194).

The muscle car reigned on Detroit area streets, and across the nation, for over a decade. In the production and promotion of the muscle car, the auto industry had not only fulfilled the demands of an affluent male youth market, but had used the opportunity to reinforce gender roles through the determined association of power, strength, and performance with masculinity. As Orval Lofgren notes, modes of driving arise out of “a specific time and place, and they have

35 “Inexpensive” is somewhat misleading. The muscle car was produced and promoted as affordable and therefore attainable to young middle-class men.
36 As most auto journalists and historians would attest, the official era of the American muscle car began with the introduction of the Pontiac GTO in 1964, and ended “when the last Super Duty 455 Firebird rolled off Pontiac’s assembly line in 1974” (Holmstrom 8). The popularity of the muscle car grew exponentially; as Heitmann notes, “the GTO was a hit from the beginning, with sales of 31,000 in 1964, 64,000 in 1965, and 84,000 in 1966” (177).
37 “Affluent” in this context is a relative term. Young men of the baby boomer generation who engaged in muscle car culture were not wealthy; however, they had more financial means than the previous generation of working-class hot rodders who congregated on Woodward Avenue.
often developed in contrast to each other. They tend to have a history of both gendering and class” (49). It is no surprise, therefore, that young women’s participation in muscle car culture was limited at best. As auto historian Margaret Walsh suggests, during the 1950s and 1960s, “teenage ‘auto culture’ looked backwards rather than forwards in terms of gender equality” (“Home” 10). While teenage girls may have expressed an interest in muscle cars, the cultural prescriptions and financial limitations young women faced during the 1960s and early 1970s prevented all but the most adventurous from driving loud and fast muscle cars of their own. As a vehicle specifically developed and marketed to the young male population, that embodied characteristics – power and performance – often conflated with male identity, the muscle car was deemed too masculine and therefore inappropriate for the young female driver. Consequently, most young women participated in muscle culture vicariously; they borrowed the car of a family member or boyfriend, stood on the sidelines with girlfriends, or dated young working-class men with hot cars. As Robert Genat notes, women’s role in Detroit muscle car culture was most often confined to that of passenger or “avid spectator” (47).

While a number of factors – the oil embargo of 1973, the implementation of strict emission requirements, and a growing emphasis on safety - led to the muscle car’s eventual demise, it has recently experienced a tremendous resurgence in popularity, particularly among the aging baby boomer population. During good-weather weekends in Southeastern Michigan, it is not uncommon to witness hundreds of gray-haired classic muscle car owners congregating at car shows, cruise-ins, swap meets, and a myriad of other classic car events. What is particularly

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38 During the 1950s and early 1960s, working-class Detroit youths could be found on Woodward Avenue street-racing hot rods of their own construction. Automotive executives such as John DeLorean, who travelled from the affluent Northwest Detroit suburbs to the downtown General Motors headquarters, would often stop along Woodward to talk cars with the blue-collar “gear heads.” These conversations were the inspiration for the next generation of hot rods – the American muscle car – and the next generation of car owners, “tens of millions of young white middle-class baby boomer men entering the auto market each year” (Holmstrom 8).
notable about the participants – other than a loss of hair and gain in girth – is that a significant number are female. While the female driver was an anomaly during the “golden age” of the muscle car, it is not uncommon today to find single twenty-something girl racers, divorced middle-aged moms, and grey-haired grandmas gunning the thunderous engines of Pontiac GTOs, Ford Mustangs, and Dodge Challengers alongside their male peers.

Tim Falconer attributes the recent surge in classic car ownership to nostalgia. He writes, “The cars have particular appeal for baby boomers with the money to once again own the models they drove back when they were young, or who now finally have the money to afford what they couldn’t afford in those days” (233). However, while reminiscence for the past may be a contributor to increased classic car interest among the male population, it does not fully explain why women, prohibited from participation as full actors in muscle car culture, would willingly own and drive a reminder of their exclusion. It does not illuminate why women would spend hard earned income on the restoration and preservation of what is most often an unessential second car driven only in good weather five months of the year. Nor does it adequately justify why the woman driver – whose interest in the automobile is presumed to be based in practicality - would willingly and enthusiastically get behind the wheel of a vehicle that is temperamental, difficult to handle, and costly to maintain.

The increase in the number of female classic muscle car drivers reflects a seismic shift in muscle car culture as well as the role of women within it. Certainly much of this can be attributed to the effects of the second-wave women’s movement, which was underway just as the muscle car era was drawing to a close. Although the women who participated in this project - who overwhelmingly identify as conservative - do not readily acknowledge the work of those responsible for the feminist revolution that, as historian Ruth Rosen writes, “would irreversibly
transform American culture and society,” they recognize that there are opportunities in all phases of women’s lives that were nonexistent when they were coming of age during the muscle car era (xiii). When asked about women’s growing presence in muscle car culture, the 71-year-old owner of a 1994 Camaro Z28 remarked, “I think women are more and more doing whatever they feel like doing and whatever they think is right for them.” However, the embedded masculinity of classic muscle car culture suggests that women’s entrance was not always easy or welcome. Women’s growing presence, therefore, indicates that women have developed inventive and effective strategies to incorporate themselves as drivers into a historically masculine fraternity. It implies that women have inscribed the muscle car with new meanings in order to establish themselves as legitimate drivers and participants in muscle car culture. It demonstrates that women have attained a level of financial and personal success that emboldens and empowers them to get behind the wheel of a classic American muscle car. It reveals that women do not view driving solely as a domestic or practical necessity, but rather, as the means to an exciting and exhilarating experience. While there are women content to participate in classic muscle car culture as passengers alongside husbands or male companions, a growing number of women – including many of those who contributed to this project – insist on owning and driving classic muscle cars of their own choosing. Through car choice, car use, and driving behavior, they have not only altered the hyper-masculine climate of American car culture, but have, in the process, reimagined what it means to be a woman driver.

Women Driving Classic Muscle Cars

Thirty-four of the 37 classic muscle car owners who contributed to this project were recruited during the summer of 2013 from classic car events in Southeastern Michigan. I enlisted the remaining participants in Minnesota (where I attended two car shows) and from the
“Greasergrrls” Facebook page. I conducted interviews with female classic muscle car owners electronically, by phone, or in person, and engaged in participation-observation at car shows, cruise-ins, and classic muscle car club meetings. Detroit’s strong muscle car legacy, combined with the Midwest’s short window of good driving weather, provided an abundance of classic car events in a concentrated geographical area in which to examine women’s participation in classic muscle car culture and to talk to women about cars. In these multiple locations I took extensive field notes, recording how women presented their cars, what artifacts were included in the display, how the female participants interacted with spectators and other show participants, whether they participated as individuals or part of a couple, and how they responded to my scholarly interest in their automobiles.

In order expand the number of possible participants I broadened the category of classic muscle car to include similar vehicles of subsequent “generations.”39 Of the 37 participants, 30 drove vehicles manufactured during the classic muscle car era – 1964-1973 – and seven owned pony cars40 produced during the 1980s and 1990s. Although the newer cars have less power and performance than their predecessors, they reflect Detroit’s muscle car heritage and, as I discovered, hold similar meanings for the women who drive them.

The women who participated in this project ranged in age from 22 to 73 although the overwhelming majority (70%) were of the baby boomer generation; i.e. 50 years of age and over. In terms of racial identity, 34 of the 37 participants were white; the remaining three contributors were Hispanic, Asian, and of mixed race (white/Native American). 35 of the women were heterosexual, and two identified as lesbian. Nearly two thirds were married or in a long-term

39 Generation or “gen” in the context of automotive manufacture refers to a major design evolution that persists for a period of time. For example, one of the participants referred to her 1991 Pontiac Firebird as “third generation.”
40 The traditional muscle car is an intermediate-sized vehicle. Pony cars are more compact and include the Chevy Camaro, Ford Mustang, and Pontiac Firebird.
relationship; the 14 single women included those who were unmarried, widowed, or divorced. The information gleaned from the interviews supported my own observations at classic muscle car events; i.e. the majority of folks who participate in classic muscle car culture are white and heterosexual.\footnote{As I noted in an unpublished article – “Out on the Highway: Cars, Community, and the Gay Driver” – there is a significant gay presence in classic car culture, evidenced in the growing number of national and regional Lambda Classic Car Club events. However as I discovered, when considering membership in an automobile organization, members of the LGBT community are more likely to join a club in which sexual identity, rather than automotive category, is the unifying factor.} In terms of financial status, just over half of those who provided information (53\%) claimed income of over $40,000\footnote{Prior to the muscle car era, car culture – i.e. hot rodding, drag racing, and cruising – was composed primarily of young working-class men. Although today’s participants are primarily middle class, there remains a strong blue-collar presence in classic muscle car culture.}. And in terms of ideology, of the 35 who provided a response, 22 identified as conservative, eight as moderate, and five as liberal. The right-leaning component of classic muscle car culture is significant. In a previous published project on women in classic muscle car culture, “Women with Muscle: Contemporary Women and the Classic Muscle Car,” I frame women’s participation through the lens of conservative feminism as defined by Katherine Kersten in Policy Review. As Kersten writes, a “self-consciously conservative feminism” is built on the following three premises: “first, that uniform standards of equality and justice must apply to both sexes; second, that women have historically suffered from injustices and continue to do so today; and third, that the problems that confront women can best be addressed by building on – rather than repudiating – the ideals and institutions of Western culture.” As I demonstrate in this chapter, a conservative feminist ideology provides a means by which many of the primarily white, heterosexual, Christian, and middle-class population of women successfully integrate themselves into the male bastion of classic American muscle car culture while adhering to traditional gender roles.

Relatively new to classic muscle car culture, women – and their cars - are often overlooked at classic car shows and events. A few of the women indicated that the “good ole
boy” cronyism pervasive within classic muscle car culture continues to unjustly reward men and their vehicles over female participants. Consequently, although a few of the women I encountered at car events were reluctant to be interviewed, the majority eagerly welcomed the opportunity to talk about their cars. As the owner of a 1968 Plymouth Barracuda remarked, “I felt honored that you asked me.” The 62-year-old owner of a 1971 Ford Gran Torino gave me a hug when our interview was completed. In the course of this project, I observed women at car shows as they interacted with fellow exhibitors and spectators, admired and asked questions about their cars, and talked to them at length about their automotive experiences. I listened to their car stories, and became intrigued by how they became hooked on automobiles through a car crazy dad, longed for a particular car since girlhood, took up a car project in memory of a beloved family member, or developed an automotive interest later in life as a means to solidify a relationship or to present themselves as accomplished single women. Through this process, I began to understand the importance of the classic muscle car to this group of women’s lives. I discovered that car choice, car use, and driving behavior of the classic-muscle-car-driving woman challenge common representations of the woman driver and disrupt what is known about the relationship between women and cars. As this project demonstrates, women drive classic muscle cars for a myriad of reasons: to demonstrate and dispense automotive knowledge; celebrate the American automobile; strengthen marriage, family, and community; create new subjectivities; and experience the power and exhilaration only a silver 1966 Dodge Charger with a 426 Hemi can provide.

The Classic Muscle Car and the Automotive Experience

In his review of the most over-the-top “macho-mobiles” on the road, Peter Cheney of The Globe and Mail notes that classic muscle cars like the 1970 Plymouth Road Runner, “take a man
back to the time before emission controls, stunt driving laws, and sexual equality changed the world.” Commenting on the rebirth of the all-American muscle car, auto critic Lawrence Ulrich notes how memories of such vehicles “conjure up images of cool young toughs revving engines and menacing the streets.” The muscle car experience on which aging auto journalists fondly reflect, and which became part of American legend as it inspired books, songs, movies, and television shows, was a gendered experience. As such, it is most often told through the perspective of a greying man recalling or reinventing a rebellious and adventurous youth.

During the decades of its production, the muscle car was a “daily driver.” Young men would often drive it to work or school during the day and test it on the streets at night. As Mark Yost writes, muscle cars “weren’t the specialty vehicles that Detroit made for car shows and drag races. These were the cars that Detroit mass-produced.” The classic muscle car today is not the daily driver it was in the past, but is a special vehicle with a myriad of meanings drawn from individual memories and latent automotive dreams and desires. For male drivers, it is a vehicle that reflects not so much who one is in daily life, but rather, the young virile man one used to be. As auto writer Douglas Sease notes, for aging baby boomers “who got their first driver’s licenses when the Beatles were making music,” the acquisition of a classic muscle car provides the opportunity to “recapture a vestige of their youth.” Evan Watkins suggests the appeal of these masculine machines to greying grandfathers “seems inextricably linked to the re-creation in some form of a moment in the technological past” (155). Few women who own and drive classic muscle cars have a comparable automotive memory. Therefore, unlike the men who own classic muscle cars as a means to connect to the past, women get behind the wheel of Firebirds and Mustangs to demonstrate who they are today. Through car choice, car use, and driving behavior,
these women present themselves as car savvy, financially secure, champions of the American auto industry, supporters of family and community, and committed to traditional relationships.

*Classic Muscle Car Choice*

The decision to own a classic muscle car is based neither on necessity nor practicality. The reasons women choose a classic muscle car differ considerably from those that commonly influence the purchase of a daily driver. Automotive concerns typically associated with the female consumer – safety, affordability, reliability, and economy – have little bearing on the selection of a loud and gas guzzling Challenger, Camaro, or ‘Cuda. As the responses of the project participants suggest, women come into classic muscle car ownership in a number of ways and make automotive choices for a variety of reasons. Some women base their selection of a classic muscle car on its design, automotive heritage, as the realization of a lifelong dream, or as a symbol of brand loyalty. Some are influenced in car choice by husbands or fathers, and often consider participation in classic muscle car culture as a means to strengthen those relationships. Others come into classic muscle car ownership by accident, through inheritance, the death of a family member, or a series of serendipitous circumstances. In some cases, ownership of a classic muscle car is not a conscious choice at all, but rather, a reluctance to part with an automobile that eventually acquires classic status over time. Whatever the motivations for ownership, the car choices made by the women in this project reflect a personal and often emotional connection to the automobile that is not duplicated in the relationship with the daily driver.

Many of the women who participated in this project have had a love affair with the muscle car since its inception. Growing up during the 1960s and 1970s, they often became fixated on a particular car and imagined the day they could eventually own one. These women - now well into their 50s, 60s, and even 70s - have finally reached a point in their lives where the
dream of a classic Mustang, Chevelle, or Camaro can be realized. As the 51-year-old owner of a 1966 Chevrolet Impala SS remarked, “I wanted one of those ever since I was a kid.” A 73-year-old retired Ford Motor Company employee declared, “I fell in love with the Mustang in 1965.” Young women’s participation in muscle car culture was most often restricted to looking at powerful Chargers, ‘Cudas, and GTOs from the sidelines; it is not surprising, therefore, that as aging adults, women’s admiration of the muscle car is often focused on its physical attributes. Of her decision to buy and restore a 1977 Chevelle, a 65-year-old retired interior designer stated, “I just always liked that body style.” A 56-year-old auto dealership biller chose a 1973 Dodge Charger because “It’s just really sleek and sexy looking.” The 43-year-old owner of a 1974 Plymouth Barracuda admitted to always liking the “E” body style because “it looks fast just standing still.” And a 49-year-old office manager exclaimed, “To me a 1969 Charger is the ultimate car. They’re sleek; they’re beautiful; they’re really cool.” No longer relegated to roles as passengers or spectators, these women call upon their newly realized financial resources as well the growing acceptance of women in classic muscle car culture to own and drive the Mustangs, Trans Ams, and Camaros they could only dream about as car crazy teenage girls.

The unique appearance of the Barracuda, Road Runner, and Superbird was also cited as a reason for a model’s selection among this group of classic muscle car owners. A 47-year-old accounting manager decided on a 1972 Plymouth Barracuda for its color and “because I like things that are different.” Of her choice of a 1998 Pontiac Trans Am, a 43-year-old optician explained, “everybody had black ones. And I knew I wanted something unique. So mine’s gold.” A 54-year-old professional gardener noted that she chose her 1967 Pontiac LeMans because “I like a car that will attract attention and is visually attractive. Color is very important, as is condition of the body.” And of her Petty Blue 1970 Plymouth Superbird, a 65-year-old teacher
remarked, “they’re so different and exotic. They’re just something that really stands out.” Nearly half (18 out of 37) of the female participants currently own daily drivers that are practical, dependable, and altogether indistinguishable from every other car on the road. As the 43-year-old owner of a 1998 Pontiac Trans Am who refers to herself as a “soccer mom” remarked, “My daily driver is the carpool car; it has kids in it; it’s filthy, it’s so different to get back into Goldie.” The 51-year-old owner of a Vitamin C Orange 1970 Plymouth Superbird stated, “the experience difference is like night and day. I mean my daily car is just average.” While these women settle for blandness and practicality in the cars they drive on a daily basis, when seeking a classic muscle car, they set their sights on a vehicle that is powerful, loud, and hard to ignore.

Some women’s automotive choices are based on brand loyalty, developed through growing up in a car family, marriage to a car guy, or working for a particular auto manufacturer. As might be expected, this automotive allegiance was particularly pronounced in the participants from Southeastern Michigan. As the region was the center of the automotive industry during the twentieth century, a significant percentage of the metropolitan Detroit population was involved with automotive production in some capacity. Many of the women who own classic muscle cars either worked in the car industry or knew someone who did. Despite the loss of automotive market share and industry jobs, the pull of the automobile remains very strong in the southeastern part of the state. As a 50-year-old Ford employee declared, “I love Mustangs. I grew up in a Ford family. I have Ford-Blue Blood!” A 22-year-old owner of a 1966 Mustang stated, “I chose the car mostly out of convenience; however, my family is partial to Mustangs.” The owner of a 1966 Dodge Charger was indoctrinated into car culture by her dad, a lifelong Dodge-Chrysler-Plymouth owner. As she stated, “That’s all he’s ever owned his whole life, so of
course it had to be Mopar\textsuperscript{43} or no car.” Of her two classic muscle cars – a 1971 Ford Gran Torino and a 1973 Mustang convertible – a 62-year-old widow remarked, “Well I’m a Ford person naturally because I retired from Ford.”\textsuperscript{44} While brand loyalty was strong among many of the participants, others were persuaded to switch automotive allegiance by persuasive husbands. As a 65-year-old owner of a 1970 Plymouth Superbird disclosed, “I came from a Chevy\textsuperscript{45} family, but my husband had a [Plymouth] Roadrunner when we married in 1972.” A 50-year-old school bus driver had always loved Mustangs, but her husband was a Mopar man. As she remarked, “Mustang really isn’t a Mopar. That’s why I landed with the [Plymouth] Barracuda.”

Seven of the women who participated in this project are driving a classic muscle car previously owned by a deceased parent or spouse. While they may not have been the primary driver of the car when the original owner was alive, retaining ownership of the automobile provides a means to keep a deceased loved one close. Of her 1972 Mustang, a 58-year-old secretary remarked, “My mother bought it new and it was her daily driver until her stroke until 1992.” A 58-year-old retired special education teacher enjoys driving her grandchildren in the 1970 Pontiac GTO once owned by her late husband. A 65-year-old educator has four classic muscle cars accumulated over her 37-year marriage. Although her husband passed away a number of years ago, she maintains and drives the cars as a way to keep active in the classic muscle car community, convey the historical significance of the classic muscle car to future

\textsuperscript{43} Mopar (Motor Parts) refers to Chrysler’s parts and service division. It has since passed into broader usage as a reference to all Chrysler products. Some of the more popular Chrysler muscle cars were the Dodge Challenger, Dodge Charger, Dodge Dart, Dodge Daytona, Dodge Super Bee, Plymouth Barracuda and ‘Cuda, Plymouth Duster, and Plymouth Superbird. Whether or not a vehicle was considered a muscle car was often dependent on its engine size and other performance options.

\textsuperscript{44} Ford products considered muscle cars include the Mustang (GT, Boss, and Mach 1), Gran Torino, and Galaxie as well as the Mercury Comet, Cyclone, and Cougar.

\textsuperscript{45} Chevrolet, or Chevy muscle cars included the Camaro, Chevelle, Impala SS, and Nova SS. Other General Motors vehicles in the classic muscle car category were the Oldsmobile 442, Pontiac Firebird, and Pontiac GTO. A comprehensive listing of classic muscle cars can be found at http://www.musclecarclub.com/musclecars/general/musclecars-definition.shtml>.
generations, and to keep the memory of her husband alive. As she stated, “I’m really glad that I kept them after my husband passed because we had so much fun with them.” A 58-year-old nurse had worked with her husband over the course of 17 years to restore a 1970 Mustang they discovered on a trip to Tennessee. On the occasion of her husband’s death two years ago, she made him a promise that she would continue to take the car out in his memory. As she noted, driving the Mustang “is very sentimental for me because of my husband’s passing. It’s a love hate relationship.” While these women had the option to sell the car upon the death of a loved one, each chose to keep, maintain, and drive the car as a means to honor that individual’s love of automobiles. In the process, each of these women developed her own special relationship to the classic muscle car.

For some of the women, the choice of a classic muscle car was a replacement for something that was lost. A 73-year-old retired store owner was unable to keep her original Mustang after her divorce. As she remarked, “I sold it and there was a big hole in my heart.” Her friends helped her find a 1973 Mustang convertible that she now describes as “the joy of my life.” A 31-year-old color analyst for a major retailer had to give up her 1986 Firebird when her marriage ended. As she noted, “I didn’t get the car, but I saved up. And I bought [a 1991 Firebird]; her name’s Bubilicious.” The ability to purchase and drive a muscle car of their own choosing after what was often a devastating life experience not only endowed these women with a sense of personal and financial accomplishment, but also provided the means – literally and figuratively - to drive away from a painful past and begin a new chapter of their lives.

Whereas some of the women in this project set their sights on a specific car and went after it, others gained ownership through unforeseen circumstances. As 27-year-old marketing coordinator remarked, “I can’t say that I chose the car; fate brought me to it.” The 1971 Pontiac
GT was her father’s first “new” car. After her parents’ divorce, when her father’s intention to sell the car became known, the young woman’s mother bought the car from him, “always with the intention of giving it to me some day.” A 51-year-old manager in the auto industry took ownership of a 1970 Plymouth Superbird in a similar manner. As she disclosed, “Mom got it in the divorce, and then sold it to me for one-hundred dollars.” A 47-year-old analyst, who had always loved Mustangs, entered a sweepstakes sponsored by a local radio station. She became the proud owner of her dream car – a 1965 Ford Mustang convertible – when, as she told me, “Dick Purtan pulled my name out of a giant Coca Cola can during the Dream Cruise.” Once these women came into possession of a classic muscle car, they became devoted owners and active classic car culture participants. As the proud sweepstakes winner remarked, “the Mustang is the most interesting car I’ve ever owned.”

Whereas most (25 of 37) of the women who participated in this project came into classic muscle car culture as aging baby boomers, a few purchased muscle cars as daily drivers as young adults, and held on to them for the rest of their lives. A 63-year-old retired retail manager fell in love with her Plum Crazy 1970 Dodge Challenger when she saw it pictured in an automotive catalog. As she told me, “I was not quite 21 when I ordered her and she was in the center of the brochure. There was a girl leaning against it. I saw it and that was it. I just knew it was my car and I ordered it right there.” Because she married young, and went from her parent’s house to one she shared with her husband, the Challenger is the only material object in her possession that belongs to her and her alone. She kept the Challenger for over 40 years, for as she explained, “I worked hard for her and no one helped me out.” The 42-year-old owner of a 1982 Ford Mustang purchased her car when she was 17. While it was originally obtained as a daily driver, she has

46 Dick Purtan, now retired, was a popular morning radio personality in the metropolitan Detroit area for over 35 years.
spent the last 25 years modifying the car in order to race it at the local dragway. As she explained, “I’m pretty much the type of person that holds onto everything.” A 1970 Plymouth Superbird - owned by a 65-year-old widow - was originally purchased new by her husband. When he received too many speeding tickets, it became her daily driver. Once its value as a classic car was realized, it was put on blocks and when restored, taken out only on special occasions. A 60-year-old professional dog handler was looking for a daily driver when she spotted a 1995 Ford Mustang GT at a swap meet. She continues to drive it on a regular basis, but in order to retain its increasing value, does so only in good weather, and never with dogs in the car. These muscle cars, originally chosen as daily drivers, eventually took on new meanings for the women who owned them. Although they outlived their original function, they have survived as icons of the American automotive industry, a reflection of a woman’s younger self, and a symbol of an adult woman’s automotive resourcefulness and savvy.

James Flink, in his 1990 cultural history of the automobile, suggests that women’s choice in cars has long been influenced by creature comforts. As he asserts, “Most of the comfort and convenience options added to cars - including vanity mirrors, heaters, air conditioning and automatic transmissions – were innovated with the ladies especially in mind” (162). Other automotive scholars have argued that style, color, and interior fabrics are the qualities that sway women’s automotive choices. In her examination of 1990s automotive advertising, Grace Lee-Maffei writes, “These advertisements exemplify the traditional association of women with fashionableness, vanity and a concern for aesthetics,” an emphasis that, as Lee-Maffei notes, “subsumes a concern for technical specification” (370). “Space, easy handling, and reliability,” suggests Margaret Walsh, have long since defined the automotive considerations of the woman driver in her role as both parent and consumer (“Automobility” 297). While comfort, style, and
reliability have traditionally been perceived as qualities of utmost importance to the female consumer, the appropriation of the classic muscle car by this particular group of women suggests there are other automotive features – power, presence, performance, and pizazz- intertwined with a myriad of meanings that have a significant influence on car choice.

Classic Muscle Car Use

Women’s automotive consumption has been traditionally considered through cultural gender prescriptions. The automobile’s importance to the woman driver, as well as the meanings ascribed to it, is assumed to originate from its use as a domestic technology. Most of the women who contributed to this project have driven, or currently own, a practical and serviceable daily driver. In fact, 18 of these women list a small SUV - i.e. a “woman’s” car - as the vehicle they use on a daily basis. They drive their Jeep Cherokees, Chevy Equinoxes, and Ford Escapes to work, to run errands, to shop, to haul stuff, and to transport kids or grandkids. As a group of women who, for the most part, subscribe to a conservative ideology, they are quietly accepting of traditional gender roles and the vehicles that accompany them. Although her husband has owned a number of performance cars over their 30-year marriage, a 50-year-old Ontario homemaker spends her days behind the wheel of an economical, 10-year-old Ford Freestar Minivan. As she noted, “I had four kids and I kind of needed a van because traveling back and forth, with kids going off to university and stuff, I needed a more economical car.”

Yet while this group of women appreciates the value of a purpose driven car, they also understand its limitations. Participation in classic muscle car culture, therefore, provides them with the opportunity to call upon the automobile in impractical, unpredictable, and altogether different ways. It allows them to escape – albeit temporarily – from their day-to-day lives and driving experiences. When asked how she feels when behind the wheel of her 1970 Dodge
Challenger, a 63-year-old retired store manager exclaims, “Giddy. I smile. I feel young again to tell you the truth.” The power of a classic muscle car, demonstrated through its significant “rumble,” is a welcome respite from the monotony of daily driving. However, as a part time, or what the owner of a 1965 Mustang referred to as a “special occasion” car, the classic muscle car is not so much driven as displayed. Its use, therefore, is often limited to standing still at car shows or cruising slowly down city and suburban streets on warm summer nights. As a “special occasion” vehicle, it is also used in parades, weddings, and as a photographic subject for advertising, publicity, and automotive publications. It is a means to win awards, garner praise, form friendships, and lure newcomers into the classic muscle car hobby. However, as indicated by the responses of the women interviewed for this project, the most important use of a Camaro, Chevelle, or ‘Cuda is as a vehicle of access into classic muscle car culture.

Due to the driving restrictions on classic and collectible vehicles, the most common use of the classic muscle car is exhibition, whether at a car show, cruise, swap meet, rod run, or other car related event. These events take place at parks, fairgrounds, parking lots, auto dealerships, automotive headquarters, main streets, churches, schools, and local restaurants. Entries vary based on the region or sponsorship; while local shows of 50 cars are common, national events attract thousands of noisy, colorful, and powerful muscle cars. At car shows, women usually sit next to their cars alongside husbands and other car couples. This allows them to answer spectator questions, keep an eye on their cars, and chat with other classic muscle car owners. The car’s use in this context is a conversation starter, source of pride, connection to other car enthusiasts, and

47 Owners of classic and collectible cars often purchase special insurance with a lowered premium, based on the assumption that few collectible cars are used as the primary source of transportation. In order to offer reduced premiums, many policies limit the length of coverage (e.g. in Michigan, from April through October) and put restrictions on mileage and/or car use. In the state of Michigan, the use of a historical or authentic license plate is allowed provided that the vehicle is not used for routine transportation, but rather, for events such as “historical club activities, parades, and car shows” (“License Plates”). Consequently, these “special occasion” vehicles spend significantly more time on display than on the road.
attention getter. At cruises, women are often part of a caravan that drives down a thoroughfare with admiring spectators lined up along the curb. These are often publicized events and are an integral part of summertime in metropolitan Detroit. Unlike car shows, cruising is not just about how a car looks, but how it sounds. The sounds produced by laying rubber, revving engines, squealing tires, noisy mufflers, open headers, and honking horns are very much part of the cruising experience. Cruisers draw a lot of attention to themselves and the cars they drive. They receive a lot of “thumbs up,” “high fives,” and other visible signs of approval from other drivers as well as spectators. Children are often found holding signs that read, “Honk!” or “Burn Out.” The women who participated in this project enjoy these events for the opportunity to demonstrate automotive savvy, connect with other auto enthusiasts, and show off their cars.

When driving a small SUV or family sedan, women are often rendered invisible. As women who, for the most part (22 out of 35), subscribe to a conservative ideology, the women in this project are used to remaining in the background in their roles as wives as mothers, or as conservative feminist Katherine Kersten explains, seeking fulfillment “in a world of limitation.” It is not surprising, therefore, that these women are flattered and appreciative of the attention they and their cars receive at various classic car events. As the 65-year-old owner of a 1970 Chevelle remarked, “I like the lookers. And people stop and talk and tell you what a nice car it is, and that’s the fun part.” A 51-year-old auto industry manager, accompanied by her 82-year-old mom, took her Vitamin C Orange 1970 Superbird to a local restaurant’s weekly car show. As she explained, “As soon as we pulled in the driveway for the Big Boy every single guy’s head just turned. In unison. It was pretty funny.” While, in these locations, the majority of attention is focused on the automobiles, some of the head turning is caused by the unexpected presence of a woman behind the wheel of a noisy and notable classic muscle car.
The classic muscle car’s use as an object for exhibition not only grants women a certain amount of attention, but also provides them with the opportunity to compete. Classic car shows offer a myriad of awards; plaques and/or trophies are given out in a number of designated show categories determined by the show giving organization. While the majority of women in this project claimed that prizes don’t matter, and that winning is more important to men, they exhibited a fair amount of pride when commenting on the awards the cars have received. The 50-year-old owner of a 1968 Plymouth Barracuda remarked, “it is gratifying to get acknowledgement of, that other people appreciate your vehicle by getting awards and trophies and acknowledgement of it. I won’t lie about that, it does give you the warm fuzzies when you do get one.” Although she had attended car shows for years, the 73-year-old owner of a 1973 Mustang won her first “real” trophy in 2013. Because she was proud to finally beat the “good ole boys,” as she told me, “at night my trophy is on the pillow next to me.” The owner of a 1972 Barracuda exclaimed, “I’m proud of it, I like to take it to shows. And I just won, this year, the best of class at the Packard Proving Grounds show. That was exciting.” The majority of the women who participate in classic muscle car culture do so alongside husbands. Thus while they enjoy displaying their own cars, many are reluctant to take attention away from the men’s vehicles. When her Chili Pepper Red 1970 Chevelle was awarded Best in Show at a recent car event, a 65-year-old retired remarked, “You know it’s a nice car, [but] I think they voted for it because it’s owned by a woman. Fact is my husband had his car there, too.” The response of this muscle car owner, as well as many of the other contributors to this project, suggests that although women enjoy participation in classic muscle car events, they understand that they will be more easily accepted if they don’t take too much attention away from the men parked alongside them.

Classic muscle cars are not all about getting attention, but are often used as a means to
raise money for charitable organizations. Many female muscle car owners prefer to enter their classic vehicles in shows that support a charity that has special meaning for them. As the owner of a 1974 Chevy Nova explained, “I just did my first charity car show. That was pretty cool. They raised over $3000 for juvenile diabetes.” A 43-year-old owner of a 1966 Dodge Charger – who is also a veterinarian - organized her first car show as a fundraiser for the Humane Society of Livingston County. As she remarked with pride, “my tech and I, so actually both women, set up and organized this car show. And it turned out to be a good fundraiser, especially for our first event. And they want me to do one again this fall, keep doing it annually.” “Classics for the Cure” is an annual event hosted by Michigan Mopar Muscle – a local car club - to benefit the Susan G. Komen For the Cure breast cancer foundation. The organizer of the event, a female club officer, works tirelessly throughout the year to advertise the show, accumulate sponsors, and garner donations. On the day of the event club and family members wearing "Classics for the Cure" t-shirts help out by circulating through the crowd with pink buckets to solicit donations. The 47-year-old owner of a 1972 Plymouth Barracuda, who is also a member of Daughters of the Revolution (DAR), entered her car at a special event to honor Veterans at the Woodward Dream Cruise. As she mentioned, to the veterans in attendance the display of classic muscle cars “was nostalgia for them, because that was just after Viet Nam, and I think a lot of those guys remember that.” While the women in this project enjoy using their cars as a means to receive recognition either personally or through awards, a greater reward is contributing to a cause that benefits an organization with which they feel a personal connection.

Because classic muscle cars are relatively rare, they are often used for special events. Many of the uses are family affairs; classic muscle cars often transport teenage couples to proms or young couples to wedding celebrations. As the 71-year-old owner of a 1994 Camaro Z28
convertible remarked, “my son got married in Greenfield Village so he took the car there, and then after the wedding they both drove in it, they drove downtown, that was just theirs to use for the evening, until the next day.” Before she placed the 1970 Plymouth Superbird with her daughter, the 82-year-old owner took the car out when her sons got married. Although her oldest son was instructed to watch the mileage, as the U.P. native told me, “We let him take it on his honeymoon and he winded up in Chicago.” Classic muscle cars are not only used by family, but are also occasionally loaned out for public or celebrity appearances. A 47-year-old analyst’s Poppy Red 1965 Mustang convertible was used as the “getaway car” in the wedding of Calvin Ford, Henry Ford’s great-great-grandson; a photo of the car accompanied a story about the event published in the New York Times. Extremely rare cars are often photographed for classic car publications to the delight of their owners. A 49-year-old office manager’s 1969 Dodge Charger has been featured in a number of books to represent the classic Charger body style. As she explained, when approached by Muscle Car Review at the Mopar Nationals, “we thought they were joking. And they said no, really.” Use of their vehicles in this manner is not only is a source of pride to these women, but also legitimates their participation in this male dominated pastime.

Because classic muscle cars are not only valuable, but are also temperamental, prone to overheating, have iffy brakes, and get terrible gas mileage, the women carefully regulate their use. While the women enjoy taking the Mustangs and Firebirds to local cruises, they prefer to stay close to home so that they keep the car’s mileage and fuel consumption low. The women are very protective of their classic muscle cars; consequently, they are reluctant to let others drive them. However, they enjoy taking friends and family members out for rides during good weather to lunch, to church, or to a neighborhood ice cream parlor. A 43-year-old veterinarian takes pleasure in picking up her niece and nephews from school in her 1966 Dodge Charger. As she

48 (Michigan) Upper Peninsula
told me, “the boys really love to be picked up. They think that’s pretty cool.” Recently widowed, a 71-year-old retired teacher is “now ready” to have some fun with her 1994 Camaro and takes her friends out for rides at every opportunity. As she told me, “on a nice evening my husband would say, used to say, ‘let’s go for a ride in the Camaro.’ And that’s one of the last events I did with [him].” To this group of women, part of the joy of owning a classic muscle car is sharing the experience with family and friends.

While the majority of women limit classic muscle car use to display at car shows and cruises, there are a few who use their Chevelles and Mustangs in altogether different ways. These women call upon their cars to compete in racing events. The 37-year-old owner of a 1974 Chevy Nova built her car and raced it before a back injury limited her car use to shows and cruises. As she remarked, “I raced it at Detroit Dragway and I went to Super Chevy and Norwalk with it.” A 42-year-old receptionist has owned her 1982 Mustang since she was 17. She has spent every year since upgrading the engine and adding performance components so that she can use it as a race vehicle. As she explained, “I used to go to a lot of car shows and that. And then when I started racing, I used to go down to Detroit Dragway every weekend until they closed that track down.” A 50-year-old homemaker from Canada has owned her 1969 Ford Mustang 429 Cobra Jet for 30 years. As she told me, “we drag raced it for about five or six years. And then we took it off the drag strip, and redid it again and restored it into a show car.” The women who use the classic muscle car as a means to drag race not only enjoy the rush and exhilaration that comes from competing in such events, but also how they disrupt gender expectation in these hyper-masculine environments. As the 42-year-old owner of the tricked out 1982 Mustang exclaimed with a certain amount of pride, most guys “get down there at the line and they’ll look over and [think] oh girl, easy win. We got this. And then when you do win and you watch their demeanor
and they’re so mad about it.” While it was common for young men to engage in illegal drag racing during the muscle car era, young women’s participation was most often limited to cheering from the sidelines. Nearly 50 years later, women not only have the means to own these fast and powerful cars, but now have the chance to use cars in ways that were once off limits to young women behind the wheel.

The women in this project use their cars in a variety of locations for a number of reasons. However, the most significant use of a classic muscle car is as an entryway into male dominated classic muscle car culture. Married women often acquire a classic muscle car to join their husbands in a shared pastime while living out a lifelong dream behind the wheel of Rangoon Red Mustang or Panther Pink Challenger. Others carry on the muscle car legacy of fathers and husbands as they enter classic muscle car culture in their memories. However they arrive, the women call upon their Chargers and Camaros to create a tight knit community within classic muscle car culture accepting of wives, daughters, and individuals from car families who express a desire for automotive knowledge, will take on responsibilities within classic automotive organizations, and who will demonstrate appreciation for the classic American muscle car.

**Classic Muscle Car Driving Behavior**

During the golden age of muscle car culture, the male teenager’s driving behavior was fueled by testosterone. The words muscle car, Ulrich writes, “conjure images of cool young toughs revving engines and menacing the streets.” As they gunned the thunderous motors of GTOs, Roadrunners, and Chargers at suburban stoplights, rural intersections, and deserted city streets, young men engaged in a coming of age practice that was daring, dangerous, and defiant. As very few young women had the means to own or the opportunity to drive muscle cars, most
could only hold their breath and hang on to their seats as the boys behind the wheel heavy-
pedaled the powerful muscle machines down the highway.

Fifty years have passed since the first GTO screamed down Detroit’s Woodward Avenue. Many of the women who admired the boys in fast muscle cars, and who may have dreamt of hot cars of their own, are now entering the Medicare years. Consequently, when taking the wheel of a classic muscle car, these 50, 60, and 70-year-old women do not endeavor to duplicate the risky driving behavior that was common among the male teenage set of their youth. Yet, neither do they desire to behave in the pedestrian and predictable manner they often assume when driving their everyday sedans, crossovers, and small SUVs. The driving performance undertaken by this group of aging boomer women behind the wheels of powerful Mustangs and noisy Barracudas is neither risky nor mundane. Rather, it exemplifies how they construct themselves as women drivers within classic muscle car culture.

To the women who participated in this project, the classic muscle car holds a very special place. As the owner of a 1966 Dodge Charger remarked, “I’m really proud and fortunate to have been able to find this and to be able to be in the position to have bought it.” Whether they were one of the very few who participated in muscle car culture as teenagers, had a boyfriend with a hot car, or simply observed rumbling cars from the sidelines, they feel blessed to own a classic Challenger, Camaro, or Mustang at this juncture of their lives. Consequently, when they get behind the wheel of these powerful and noisy machines, they can act a little crazy, drive to surprise, experience the power, or feel “cool” and “badass.” Yet as these cars have considerable value, as well as temperamental old technology, they also treat them with a great deal of respect.

Women’s admission into muscle car culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although a few of the women who participated in this project drove muscle cars as teenagers, the majority
acquired their cars within the past ten years. Consequently, the women who drive Mustangs and ‘Cudas often feel the need to celebrate, and express their enthusiasm in unconventional ways. As the 47-year-old owner of a 1965 Poppy Red Mustang convertible exclaimed, “when I drive it on the expressway, there always has to be a point and time on the expressway that I take my hands off the wheel and throw them up in the air and scream really loud.” As the 73-year-old owner of “White Thunder” – a 1973 Ford Mustang convertible – disclosed, “When I’m on the road and the opportunity presents itself I slow down then punch the accelerator. It feels like we have wings and are flying.” On a drive to Tennessee on an empty highway with her kids in the back seat, the owner of a 1970 Plymouth Superbird decided to see what the car could do. As she remarked, “So I opened it up because once you’ve seen a hundred miles an hour then the aerodynamics kind of kick in and you just feel like you’re flying; it’s awesome!” Accustomed to assuming a serious demeanor when behind the wheel of a daily driver, these women often use the opportunity of classic muscle car ownership to behave much like the spirited and carefree teenage drivers they didn’t have the opportunity to be so many years ago. Having spent the majority of their adult lives tooling around town in “family” vehicles, in which their driving behavior is expected to reflect their status as respectable wives and responsible mothers, these women enjoy the brief respite from daily driving made possible by a throating Mustang or rumbling GTO. Of the experience of driving her pink-on-the-driver-side and blue-on-the-passenger-side 1991 Pontiac Firebird, a 43-year-old color analyst remarked, “It’s like a sense of elation for me. I smile the whole time; I sing in my car. It’s fabulous.”

Due to the masculine history of the American muscle car, the expectation is that when a classic Charger or Camaro is spotted on a road, a man will be driving it. The women who participated in this project enjoy the opportunity to cruise down the highway, pull up to a
stoplight, or pull into a car show and watch observers do a double take when noticing a woman behind the wheel. As the 56-year-old owner of a black 1973 Dodge Challenger explained, “I think a lot of times when a guy pulls up next to me, they’re shocked to see that it’s a woman driving and not a man.” Of her 1993 Mustang GT, a 50-year-old auto industry project coordinator remarked, “I think guys don’t expect a chick to be driving a hot car like that, or know how to handle it.” Many women indicated that when they are in the driver’s seat of a classic Cougar or Chevelle, they are often tempted to gun the engines, burn rubber, or run with open pipes in order to startle other drivers, particular those of the male persuasion. As the 65-year-old owner of a red 1970 Chevelle remarked, “People turn around and look, and it sounds good, it makes a lot of noise. A lot of people look because of a woman driving it.”

Long relegated to roles as passengers and spectators, the women who participated in this project appreciate that they now have the ability and means to participate in muscle car culture as drivers. To many female classic muscle car owners, a Candy Apple Red Mustang or Top Banana Yellow Challenger is something they often longed for but – due to financial and cultural restrictions - never thought they could actually possess. Women who had an interest in muscle cars as teenagers often had to put that passion aside after marriage. Although many husbands continued to cruise down Woodward after walking down the aisle, domestic obligations and societal mandates kept women at home. Not only did young married wives and mothers lack the time to participate in muscle car culture, they often found it difficult to justify spending limited financial resources on something as inessential as a Panther Pink Challenger. As the 54-year-old owner of a 1969 Pontiac LeMans exclaimed, “I love that my car turns a lot of heads as I’m driving, especially when the guys see that it’s a chickmobile. I feel proud that my car looks so
nice and I remember what it was like when I could only look at the nice rides going by.” Once limited to the sidelines, these women relish the opportunity to drive to surprise.

The American muscle cars produced during the mid 1960s and early 1970s were rough and fast performance machines. As auto writer Andy Halloway notes, classic muscle cars are “fast by definition,” but they are also a “tougher and louder ride than today’s cars” (73). While the vehicles from the muscle car era were not known for good handling, they delivered powerful straight-line acceleration for optimal street racing success. Many of the women revealed how they were introduced to this experience of “controlled terror” (Wojcicki qtd. in Halloway 73). A 51-year-old auto industry manager, upon inheriting her father’s 1970 Superbird Roadrunner, was encouraged by her dad to “put it in second gear and floor it” in order to “understand what kind of power this car has.” The 51-year-old owner of a 1966 Chevrolet Impala tested her car’s performance while “running neck and neck against a 67 Mercury Cougar, going over 100 miles an hour,” until her son spotted a policeman and kicked off the ignition to slow her down. While a few of the women are somewhat intimidated by the raw power of the classic muscle car, the majority enjoy testing what they, and the car, are capable of. As the 50-year-old owner of a 1993 Mustang GT remarked, “I’m not afraid to let it perform for me. I don’t drive like that every day.” And as a 49-year-old office manager asserted, “there’s still nothing that can compare overall to getting into that Charger and knowing the horsepower capabilities that they have.” While women’s driving performances in daily drivers are commonly sane and sedate, many enjoy the opportunity to experience the no-holds-barred power of a muscle car, often for the first time in their lives. As a 73-year-old retired store owner exclaimed, the powerful engine of her 1973 Ford Mustang “will take me where I want to go in my quest for this high within my chest.”
The driving behavior of a female classic muscle car owner often reflects a different – and unexpected - side of her personality. As the 37-year-old owner of a 1974 souped-up Chevy Nova remarked, “It makes you feel, I don’t know, a little tougher when you get in it.” A five-foot-two-inches tall 50-year-old executive director feels formidable when driving her 1966 Chevy Impala. As she remarked, “People just don’t expect older women to be driving such a big powerful car.” While these women are unremarkable drivers in an Equinox, Enclave, or Escape, they take on new driving personas when stepping on the gas of a loud, powerful, and unpredictable classic muscle car. As a 73-year-old retired administrative assistant explained, “The daily driver, I just feel like I’m in it going somewhere; the Mustang, I’m in control and I’m driving it.”

Despite the power and performance of the classic muscle car, the women who own them recognize their value and understand that not everyone on the road is familiar with the idiosyncrasies of an old Mustang or Challenger. Consequently, when on public highways, the driving behavior of female muscle car owners is often guarded. As the 47-year-old owner of a 1973 Plymouth Barracuda noted, “you cannot drive the muscle car and talk on the cell phone. You have to actually concentrate when you’re driving an older vehicle.” As many of the women remarked, defensive driving is of particular importance in a classic muscle car, as drivers of contemporary automobiles do not take into consideration how old technology impacts the ability to brake, turn, and shift. The owner of a 1970 Dodge Challenger remarked, “I worry about people coming off ramps and hitting me on the freeway because they don’t look.” As a 51-year-old auto industry manager noted, “I enjoy driving [the 1970 Plymouth Superbird] but it does make me a little bit leery knowing what the value of it is. I mean it’s insured but you don’t want anything to happen to it.” While there is a certain amount of concern over potential damage associated with all kinds of vehicles, the value of classic muscle cars, as well as the difficulty of
finding replacement parts, exacerbates the concerns of classic ‘Cuda and Camaro owners, particularly since as women they are likely to have less discretionary income than their male counterparts. Of her 1966 Mustang, a 22-year-old student remarked, “if I ever happen to think about someone crashing into my car it nearly brings me to tears every time.” Thus while the women who participated in this project enjoy the power and performance of the classic muscle car, it is an enthusiasm tempered with caution.

The women who contributed to this project consider their gender performances in daily drivers as normative. As individuals who identify primarily as ideologically conservative, they are generally accepting of culturally prescribed gender roles. Consequently, they concede that a “woman’s car” is appropriate for the performance of domestic tasks in the roles of wife and mother. However, while they describe themselves as typical women, they present themselves as atypical women drivers. They accomplish this in three ways. They acknowledge that there are women whose driving performances add credence to the stereotype and position themselves as diametrically opposed to them; they note the ways in which their own driving performances are superior to those of men; they cite their ability to handle, maintain, and enjoy a classic muscle car as demonstrable proof that they are not stereotypical women drivers.

The participants in this project, particularly those over the age of 50, recognize the existence and understand the significance of the woman driver stereotype. As the 73-year-old owner of a 1973 white Mustang declared, “It’s a put down. It’s like we’re inept, inadequate. I don’t like it.” The 62-year-old owner of a 1964 ½ Mustang Coupe remarked, “some people say women aren’t good drivers. I think sometimes when you hear that it’s kind of a slap on the face. Because it’s kind of putting women into, all women into one category and […] a lot of women are very good drivers.” The 47-year-owner of a 1965 red Mustang remarked, “If it’s true, that
women are not as good drivers as men, I’d like to consider myself excluded from that stereotype.” In order to construct themselves as atypical women drivers, the women in this project often list the myriad of ways in which their own driving behavior, when behind the wheel of a classic muscle car, sets them apart from the stereotypical woman driver. As the 49-year-old owner of a 1966 Dodge Charger asserted, “I am completely conscious of listening to my car run; I’m listening to anything out of the norm; I watch gauges; I’m not a woman driver.” The 43-year-old owner of a 1974 Plymouth Barracuda remarked, “I do not feel I’m a typical ‘woman driver’ so to speak. I am very comfortable and confident driving.” And as 31-year-old owner of a 1991 Pontiac Firebird exclaimed, “I’m proud to be a woman driver that can drive well, and not be some crazy woman getting into accidents [and] backing into people.”

The women constructed themselves as atypical women drivers not only by demonstrating how their own driving performances challenged the woman driver stereotype, but also by noting the ways in which their driving behavior was superior to that of men. In comparing her own driving to that of men behind the wheel, the 42-year-old owner of a 1982 Mustang remarked, “I think we concentrate a little bit better, we pay attention a little bit better maybe.” The 56-year-old owner of a 1973 Dodge Challenger added, “I think that women have faster reflexes [than men]; most women I think pay real attention to the road.” In her own research into various driving cultures, Redshaw discovered that women are often “keenly aware of being excluded from what was seen as a ‘more authentic’ experience of driving because they were women” (“Driving 84). In an automotive culture that has historically linked superior driving ability with masculinity, it is understandable that female classic muscle car owners would compare their driving behavior to that of men in order to validate their identities as exceptional drivers. The women in this project were not suggesting that they drive like men, but rather, that in many situations their driving
ability was, in fact, superior to that of their male counterparts. Using the male driver as the standard allowed these women to not only construct themselves as exceptional drivers, but also provided them with the opportunity to distance themselves from existing stereotypes.

Women who own and drive classic muscle cars construct themselves as women drivers not in the conventional sense, but rather, as individuals whose driving skills, auto knowledge, and “moxie” indicate they possess a high level of automotive acumen and driving ability. Because the majority of classic muscle cars have manual transmissions, mastery of the stick shift was often mentioned as an example of exceptional driving ability. As a 47-year-old 1965 Mustang owner noted, “I can tell you that everybody’s impressed that I can drive a stick shift.” The ability to deftly handle a car with 50-year-old technology without the benefit of power steering or disc brakes was often repeated as an example of driving proficiency and skill. As 49-year-old office manager explained, “A modern car may have smoother handling capabilities compared to the muscle car. But there’s still nothing that can compare overall to getting into that Charger and knowing that the horsepower capabilities that they have.” The ability to handle classic muscle cars, described by Holmstrom as “lightweight cars stuffed full of big-block V8 power” with crude handling and “virtually no braking power,” was often cited by participants as a demonstration of women’s driving acumen. As 60-year-old owner of a 1995 Mustang GT remarked, “I need more self control in this car. I really do. If I’m not careful taking off from a light it will go sideways on me. So you have to be a much more alert driver.” Of her 1991 Mustang, a 50-year-old auto industry project coordinator declared, “I know how to handle it, I know how to do a burn out, I know how to get it, when I need to, I’m not afraid to make it perform for me.” The women repeatedly emphasized that mastery of the skills exclusive to the classic muscle car experience unequivocally demonstrated they were not, by any stretch of the
imagination, stereotypical women drivers. Through driving performances that include “boilin’ the hides,” “burnin’ rubber,” “doin’ a brodie,” and “poppin’ the clutch,” these women illustrate there is more than one way to consider the woman behind the wheel.

The Classic Muscle Car and Meaning Making

As a fast, powerful, noisy, colorful, and unpredictable vehicle originally conceived, produced, and marketed to a young male audience, the dominant meanings ascribed to the classic American muscle car have traditionally been considered from a male perspective. To the young male who drove it, the muscle car served as a symbol of rebellion, power, virility, masculinity, individuality, proficiency, sexual prowess, and audacity. As Foster writes, “For teenagers and many young men in their early twenties, racing powerful, noisy cars at maximum speed was a symbol of self-expression and perhaps, a rebellion against the cautious, conservative values of their Depression-era parents” (78). The young men who came of age during the muscle car era are now approaching retirement or are full-fledged senior citizens. While they still appreciate the classic muscle car, the meanings they assign to them have changed over time. Aging boomers still in their peak earning years often view the classic muscle car as an investment. However, the majority of aficionados consider the GTO and Camaro as a way to relive their youth, obtain something they owned or longed for in the past, or as auto journalist Keith Naughton writes, embrace something that “remind[s] us of a time when American power was celebrated.”

Nostalgia, write Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, “is centrally concerned with the concept of loss” (923). It is expressed through a longing for a lost time or for something that is

49 These are slang terms often used in drag racing, hot rod, or muscle car cultures. “Boilin’ the hides” refers to smoking the tires during a drag race. “Burnin’ rubber” is “to run a car engine so fast that one spins the tires so that rubber is left on the street” (“burn rubber”). “Doin’ a brodie,” also known as a “doughnut,” is a maneuver that entails rotating the rear or front of the vehicle around the opposite set of wheels in a continuous motion, creating (ideally) a circular skid-mark pattern of rubber on a roadway (“Doughnut (driving)”). “Poppin’ the clutch” is a method of starting a car by “engaging the manual transmission through the motion of the vehicle” (“Popping the clutch”).
no longer attainable. Nostalgia plays a major role in men’s participation in classic muscle car
culture. The balding boomers long for the power – both personal and automotive - that existed
during the muscle car era. As Mike Mueller writes, the classic muscle car represents a time
“when men were men, [and] women weren’t” (18).

The majority (27 of 37) of women who contributed to this project came late to muscle
cars. Thus although it is now common to see female participants in classic muscle car culture
alongside men, the meanings women ascribe to classic Mustangs, Camaros, and Chargers differ
considerably from those of male car enthusiasts. As Lerman, Mohun, and Oldenziel suggest,
“gender ideologies play a central role in human interactions with technology” (1). While the
women in this project appreciate the power and performance of the classic muscle car as much as
their male counterparts, the value they place on these classic vehicles is more celebratory than
nostalgic. Because financial and cultural limitations restricted women’s participation in muscle
car culture during the 1960s and 1970s, the women have constructed new ways of celebrating the
classic muscle car that do not dwell too heavily on the historical past. They view the classic
muscle car as the means to pay tribute to a male family member, to acquire and disseminate
automotive knowledge, as a source of identity and empowerment, a display of gender equality,
and most importantly, as a means to strengthen relationships, family, and community.

The Classic Muscle Car as Tribute

The inscription on the front license plate of a 1974 Chevy Nova reads, “In memory of my
Dad, I’ll race you in heaven.” Like many of the women who participated in this project, the
Nova’s 37-year-old owner developed an interest in automobiles through her father. As she
remarked, “He’d have us out there helping with brake jobs; we were little kids. I started going to
car shows while I was in a stroller with him.” She purchased the Nova because her dad “fell in
love with it.” They worked on it together until his sudden death of a brain aneurism. As she related to me, “I don’t think I could ever get rid of it now, with my dad and everything. There’s a lot of my dad in that car.” The 47-year-old owner of a 1965 Mustang often accompanied her father to his job as a mechanic when she was a girl. As she remarked, “I remember going into the garage where he worked, and I just loved the smell.” After his passing, she decided to honor him and his love for cars by using his childhood nickname for her on the classic Mustang’s personalized license plate.

A 43-year-old veterinarian developed an interest in cars as a child in order to become closer to her father. As she remarked, “So he was always in the garage, and as he said, he had two girls, but he treated us just like if we were his sons, and we were always out there helping him in the garage and handing him tools.” When she had the means to acquire a classic muscle car of her own, her choice was a 1966 Dodge Charger, which was the family car growing up. She and her dad drove down to an auction in North Carolina together to make the purchase. As she noted, she could never give the car up “because this is something I share with my dad.” Among many of the women interviewed for this project, growing up around car crazy dads not only created an affinity for automobiles, but also provided them with the opportunity to develop a close relationship with the first man in their lives. To these women, the classic muscle car serves as a means to remember, honor, or connect to a much-loved father.

Women who develop a love for cars through car-loving husbands are often unable to let go of the vehicle after a spouse’s passing. Stated the 61-year-old owner of a 1970 Monte Carlo, “My cars mean a whole heck of a lot. My cars, my husband, there’s so much of him in there.” When asked how she feels when driving the 1994 Camaro that belonged to her late husband, a 71-year-old widow remarked, “I just feel free. I mean as sad as my life has been in the last year
and a half I thought that’s just, I can’t bring my husband back; he’d want me to be happy. I think about him a lot when I’m driving it just because he was so proud of that car.” The 1970 Mustang was a project that a 58-year-old nurse and her late husband worked on together. After his death, she made a promise that she would continue to take it out on occasion. As she noted, “I want to keep the promise to him; he would have done this, oh my gosh he would have been in it day and night. He loved it.” As Kathleen Franz notes, corporations, engineers, and consumers aided in the construction of the automobile, determining its cultural importance as a machine, consumer product, and form of mobility” (“Automobiles” 53). However, as this group of women demonstrates, the meanings women attribute to the automobile often have little to do with popular conceptions of its “cultural importance.” Rather, the women who inherited an interest in cars through fathers, as well as the women who shared in the classic muscle car hobby with husbands, view those vehicles as a means to keep a loved one close by celebrating his life and passion for automobiles.

The Classic Muscle Car as a Means to Automotive Knowledge

Whether women come to classic muscle car culture with prior automotive knowledge, or use the opportunity of owning a Mustang or Cougar to learn more about cars, they enjoy the opportunity to further their automotive education and pass on their accumulated knowledge, skill, and passion for classic cars to others. As the 62-year-old owner of a 1964 ½ Mustang remarked, “I think a lot of women have learned about cars over the years, and they know a little bit more about the engines.” While many of the women were educated on the finer points of cars by fathers, brothers, or husbands, others had to learn along the way. Of her 1969 Mustang, the 50-year-old owner remarked, “I didn’t know a whole lot when I first got it, but as we’ve gone to different car shows and stuff, I hear my husband talking about it and I just kind of pick up on
stuff.” Many of the women do extensive research on their cars in order to document the vehicle’s authenticity and to be better able to answer questions of interested spectators and exhibitors at car events. As a 73-year-old retired Ford administrative assistant explained, once she acquired her 1964 ½ Mustang, “I went out and got books, and I have like a scrapbook [of the vehicle’s history] that I carry in my car.” Some of the women have taken a more hands on approach, as they acquired automotive knowledge on their own through the restoration, repair, and maintenance process. A 42-year-old receptionist enrolled in classes in auto body and painting to further her automotive education. As a 49-year-old office manager noted, the 1969 Dodge Charger that she and her husband restored was “a very educational car. I know how to do things now that I never did before.” As she helped her husband restore her 1973 Dodge Challenger, a 53-year-old auto dealership biller gained experience that helped her to understand and appreciate her car better. As she stated with a fair amount of pride, “I learned to sandblast; I learned to paint; I did lots of things. I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty, that’s for sure.”

Many of the women who participated in this project enjoy the challenge of acquiring knowledge and experience in an area that was once off limits to them. As the 47-year-owner of a 1972 Plymouth Barracuda exclaimed, “Girls aren’t supposed to be interested in cars and engines and that sort of stuff. They wouldn’t let you in auto mechanics or anything like that.” As she explained, getting involved in classic muscle cars became a “try to do something you’re not allowed to do kind of thing.” Once they acquire automotive knowledge, women enjoy displaying that knowledge, particularly in front of doubting male spectators and exhibitors. As the 54-year-old owner of a 1967 Pontiac LeMans noted, “Men who find out about my car generally seem to be impressed. All of a sudden they seem to credit me with a little more intelligence, and feel I
know more of what I’m talking about.” The 51-year-old owner of a 1969 Mustang Mach I remarked, “Men when they look at me and I know what I’m talking about, it blows them away.”

Because of the longstanding association between the American muscle car and masculinity, male acknowledgement of women’s automotive knowledge often serves as source of validation to women’s classic muscle car culture participation. Reflecting on gender differences in the production and use of technologies, Lerman, Mohun, and Oldenziel note that dominant gender ideologies often determine who has access to technological knowledge or control over a particular form of technology. The women who contributed to this project recognize that historically, men have been ordained as the keepers of automotive knowledge. Many women are as knowledgeable if not more so than men in the classic muscle car hobby; however, it is often assumed that their gender precludes them from speaking intelligently about cars. As the 42-year-old owner of a 1982 Ford Mustang remarked, “I get a lot of, especially when you know how to work on a car and if you go somewhere like to an auto parts store or something they’ll automatically look at my boyfriend like I don’t know what I’m talking about and everything.” Women who acknowledge that they have more to learn are often put in an untenable position. If they present themselves as knowledgeable they are categorized as “posers;” if they admit their deficiencies they are routinely dismissed. As a 22-year-old owner of a 1966 Mustang disclosed, “Although I do know a lot about cars – more than the average person in my age group - I do not have an extensive knowledge. Men typically think I do not know what I am doing, and when I don’t that confirms their stereotype and thus is counter to my goals.” The remarks of the young Mustang enthusiast suggest there is an underlying double standard in classic muscle car culture. As she remarked, “even though many men who enjoy car related
activities don’t know as much about their car and haven’t done as much physical labor on their car as I have, their deficiencies do not seem to be viewed as large as mine.”

Despite encounters in which their automotive intelligence is questioned, the women who participated in this project understand that admission into the historically masculine culture of classic muscle cars is dependent on male support and approval. Thus they must often walk a fine line, displaying enough knowledge to gain legitimacy, but not so much as to appear arrogant. Married women often rely on the support of husbands to gain respect within the classic muscle car community. Many were quick to point out that, rather than answer questions from interested spectators about their wives’ cars, their husbands will redirect those spectators to their wives. As the 53-year-old owner of a black 1973 Dodge Challenger remarked, “the car is always showed [sic] with my name on it and he always lets people know the car belongs to me not him.” To the women who participated in this project, the acquisition of automotive knowledge eases their entry into classic muscle culture, offers them legitimacy in a traditionally male dominated pastime, and provides them with the opportunity to promote the American classic muscle car to younger generations of automobile enthusiasts.

When asked about her participation in classic muscle car culture, the 49-year-old owner of a 1969 Dodge Charger remarked, “Sometimes when people come out to a car show and they see cars and stuff they have to start thinking hey I wouldn’t mind having one myself and it gets them interested. And that’s really neat whenever you can know that that the activities you do to bring other people to be interested, I think especially kids who are younger.” As classic muscle car culture is composed primarily of aging baby boomers familiar with old Mustangs, Challengers, and GTOs, encouraging an interest in cars among the younger generation is a top priority. As a 62-year-old retired Ford employee who owns two classic muscle cars exclaimed,
“People, the younger generation, a lot of them will say ‘well why do you do that?’ They have no concept of what these cars mean.” Often the women will talk to spectators about past muscle car experiences as a way to pique the interest of children or young adults who may be accompanying them. The 49-year-old owner of a 1966 Dodge Charger believes these important episodes of storytelling not only help instill an appreciation of older cars in young enthusiasts, but also bring families closer together. As she noted, “it’s a moment that they’re getting a story from their family’s past.”

The majority of women who participated in this project take part in car shows and other car related events not only as a means to acquire and display automotive knowledge, but also to educate spectators on the significance of the muscle car in American automotive history. As the 43-year-old owner of a 1974 Plymouth Barracuda noted, “[The muscle car] is a part of American ingenuity. Most people between 35-65 look back the muscle car era and smile because they have a connection to it.” The 73-year-old owner of a 1964 ½ Mustang remarked, “Well I think [American muscle cars] did a lot for the automotive companies. They got the attention of everybody and they were the cars to own.” As many of the women have a strong connection to the American auto industry - as daughters and wives of autoworkers or as industry employees themselves - they consider it a privilege to own cars that, in the words of a 49-year-old 1969 Dodge Charger owner, “pushed it to the limits to see how powerful they could go with cars.”

Because there is a strong conservative component within classic muscle car culture, exhibiting a classic Mustang or Camaro is often considered a display of patriotism. Many of the

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50 While the association of ideological conservatism with the American auto industry and ownership of a domestic automobile is “common sense” in Southeastern Michigan and the neighboring auto centric areas, scholars in a variety of locations have made the connection among American cars, patriotism, and a conservative worldview. The Gallop Poll results of car preference by political ideology during the 2004 presidential election concluded that conservatives are more likely to drive American cars. Terence Shimp and Subhas Sharma argue that patriotism and conservatism in the metropolitan Detroit area are strongly linked to ownership of an American automobile.
exhibitors decorate the cars with patriotic symbols; stuffed American eagles are often perched on
car hoods and American flags can be spotted flying from car antennas. A 56-year-old auto
dealership biller finalized the purchase of her 1973 Dodge Challenger on September 11, 2001.
As she explained, “when I display it I have a flag that I put on the car and my husband works for
a tire store, and one of the companies that he was dealing with at the time had hats made that said
‘Remember 2001’ so I keep one of those on the air cleaner when I display the car at car shows.”
For the women in this project, classic muscle car culture is not only a location for the acquisition
and distribution of automotive knowledge, but is also a means to promote American power and
resourcefulness through the display of fast, loud, and powerful American muscle cars.

*The Classic Muscle Car as a Means to New Subjectivities*

There are many features of car cultures, write Marsh and Collett, “which are clear
testaments to aspects of the automobile which have little or nothing to do with transport” (7).
While classic muscle cars were used as basic transportation during the years of their production,
they have since moved on to iconic status. Yet although the classic muscle car’s function has
changed dramatically over the past half century it remains an important contributor to the
identity of the individual who drives it. Tim Sprague, CEO of the Kruse collector car auction
compny, notes that many buyers of vintage muscle cars “are now at a place in their lives where
they have the ability to buy those toys and relive their youths” (qtd. in Eldridge “Collector”). For
male members of the boomer generation, the classic American muscle car represents the tough,
aggressive, and bold teenagers they once were rather than who they are today. Since the majority
of women who participate in classic muscle car culture had neither the means nor opportunity to
own muscle cars as teens, the classic Firebirds, Camaros, and Challengers are more likely to
symbolize who they are at this moment in time, and what they – as adult women - have
accomplished. More than just an automobile, the classic muscle car allows these women to project an unexpected part of their personality, to present themselves as certain types of individuals, or to create entirely new personas. The new subjectivities made possible by classic muscle car ownership serve as a form of empowerment to this primarily conservative group of women, and also effectively trouble the common perception of the woman driver.

The women who participated in this project often cite common characteristics between themselves and the cars they drive as a way to introduce themselves to the classic muscle car community and to the world at large. A 47-year-old analyst believes she and her 1965 Mustang convertible are “a good couple, a good match” as they are both sporty, fun, and “a little bit crazy.” The 51-year-old executive director of a non-profit likes to think of herself as a “badass” when behind the wheel of her 1966 Chevrolet Impala. As she exclaimed, “I identify my car as female; she has a name and she is a badass, too.” When a 50-year-old housewife and school bus driver pulls into a car show in her Frost Blue 1968 Plymouth Barracuda with a personalized “princess” vanity plate on the front, attired in an ensemble color coordinated with her car, she is not only announcing herself as the owner of the vehicle, but is suggesting she is as “flashy and out there” as the car she drives. Humanizing a car in this fashion, note Marsh and Collett, denotes the special significance a car has for its owner. As they write, “we give [cars] personalities which reflect the nature of our relationship with them” (13).

Seiler introduces the concept of expressive individualism to describe how consumer culture can provide resources for the “construction and performance of a distinctive individual identity” (34). The women of this project often call upon the Pontiac GTO or Dodge Challenger to make statements about themselves as powerful, badass, fun, or unique. They do not envision themselves as female pioneers within classic muscle car culture but rather use the identities they
inhabit through ownership of particular automobiles with specific characteristics to claim a space for themselves within it. Driving and identifying with a classic muscle car becomes a way to express individualism within a culture composed of boomer and post-boomer men and women who - overwhelmingly white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual, and ideologically moderate to conservative - are very much alike.

Many of the women choose or makeover cars that enhance existing facets of their identities. As a 22-year-old college student exclaimed, “I like having a muscle car because it is a piece of who I am. It makes me unique.” Of her 1982 Mustang, a 42-year-old health clinic receptionist remarked, “It just shows off my personality. And it’s fun, so I guess it shows I’m a fun person.” The 37-year-owner of a 1974 Chevy Nova noted that the ease in which classic muscle cars can be modified allows individuals to make them their own so that “your own personality kind of comes out.” While many of the women view the classic muscle car as an extension of themselves, others choose to drive cars with characteristics diametrically opposed to their own. Women who are normally passive and unassuming, for example, often enjoy taking on the bold personas of their Mustangs and Chargers, even if only temporarily. As the 27-year-old owner of a 1971 Pontiac GT-37 remarked, “at first impression I’m young, feminine and quiet spoken. Owning this car goes against all of the stereotypes for those three qualities.” Although she turns heads when behind the wheel of her rumbling Plum Crazy 1970 Dodge Challenger, as the 63-year-old retired support manager explained, “I’m just a naturally very quiet lady who enjoys her car.”

As feminist scholars Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer argue, women – particularly those over the age of 50 - are often rendered invisible in the media and in public life. The ubiquity of the “woman’s” car – i.e. small SUV or crossover – assures that women’s invisibility
carries over into American car culture. Consequently, when women in their 50s, 60s, and 70s get
behind the wheel of a noisy, colorful, and powerful classic muscle car, they not only make
themselves visible, but suggest they are not the quiet, passive, and conventional individuals
others make them out to be. A 73-year-old retired administrative assistant enjoys the “tooting,”
waving, and thumbs up she receives when out on the road with her Rangoon Red 1964 ½
Mustang. As she noted, driving a classic muscle car demonstrates to others that, “I’m a cool old
lady.” The 54-year-old owner professional gardener loves that her 1967 Pontiac LeMans “turns a
lot of heads” when she’s driving. As she remarked, getting behind the wheel of a loud and well-
maintained classic muscle car demonstrates, “I’m not afraid to go against traditional stereotypes
for women.”

The classic muscle car also provided single women in particular with the opportunity to
present themselves as accomplished individuals. Whether unmarried, widowed, or divorced,
ownership of a classic muscle car often signified a new start, modest financial success, or a form
of “woman power.” A 31-year-old children’s clothing color analyst remarked, “When I was
married I had a rough time. And when I got to pick the Firebird and drive a Firebird, that was the
start of a new chapter in my life.” A 73-year-old widow confessed to a “prior life full of
hardships.” However, the 1973 white convertible Mustang parked in her driveway serves as an
affirmation that “life is better, it’s beyond good.” The 51-year-old owner of a 1966 Chevrolet
Impala asserted, “When I got divorced in 2003 my ex-husband said to me ‘you will never keep
this car on the road.’ Well, I have kept it on the road, and I have restored it.”

For these women and others in similar circumstances, the power to drive away from a
difficult situation is often found behind the wheel of a classic muscle car. The classic muscle car
announces its owner as an empowered individual, as representative of power in an individual’s
personal life or that of financial power made possible through work or career. While it is not uncommon for successful men to purchase an additional sporty or impractical automobile for leisure time use, women – whose driving preferences are assumed to lean toward the functional – are presumed to be satisfied with the family car. In addition, if women do have discretionary income, it is expected they will spend it on personal items rather than something as extraneous as a “special occasion” vehicle. The purchase of a classic Challenger, Charger, or Barracuda, therefore, not only signifies a certain amount of financial independence, but the empowerment that accompanies it. As the 72-year-old owner of a 1973 Mustang remarked, “women are high wage earners today, and they can go out and buy their own, they don’t have to ask and grovel.”

A 73-year-old owner of a 1964 ½ Mustang – who in 1994 had to refuse her husband’s help as well as “fight with the lady at the bank” in order to finance her classic Mustang - declared, “[Women] have their own jobs, they have their own money and they can go out and get these cars. They can afford them. They can get loans on them.”

Because the majority of women who participated in this project identify as conservative, they do not frame their participation in classic muscle car culture as a victory for women’s rights. Rather, they call upon the conservative tenets of autonomy and individualism as the means to gain access into classic muscle car culture. The single women in particular emphasized that individual achievements – the result of acumen, persistence, and hard work – were responsible for women’s acceptance into this historically masculine fraternity. A 31-year-old color analyst for a major retailer argued that the numerous trophies garnered by her 1991 Pontiac Firebird make her feel like “I’m doing something right, getting rewards for my hard work and all the money and time and energy that I put into my car.” A 42-year-old physician receptionist, who has received numerous awards for her 1982 Mustang at car shows as well as on the track, noted,
“I went to school for auto body and painting, so then I got involved in painting the car, so then that even drew me into more to work on it, and then everything on the car, me and my boyfriend have pretty much done the work all ourselves.” In her research into conservative feminism, Rebecca Klatch noted that the laissez-faire conservative woman upholds individualism as an ideal, views both men and women as autonomous actors, and recognizes the presence of gender inequality and sex discrimination in American society. Most of the women acknowledged that men have been reluctant to integrate women into classic muscle car culture; as the 60-year-old owner of a 1971 Dodge Charger Super Bee remarked, “I think that the men wanted to keep the women out of the muscle car.” The 63-year-old owner of a 1970 Dodge Challenger was more blunt, as she declared, “Men don’t think we can do this kind of thing.” Thus while most indicated they enjoy their position as one of the few female presences in the hobby, they enthusiastically support the inclusion of other women in classic muscle car culture. They view women’s participation as a sisterhood of sorts, and as a means to let menfolk know that they will not be left behind. Of her ownership of a 1972 Barracuda, a 47-year-old accounting manager exclaimed, “I think it just shows that what we can do. We can still do it, too, you know? It doesn’t have to be a male I’ll call it sport; it doesn’t have to be a male thing. Women can drive a muscle car or a fast car just as much as they can.”

The Classic Muscle Car as a Vehicle of Gender Equality

In “Women with Muscle,” my original investigation of women and classic muscle cars, I considered women’s participation in classic muscle car culture through the lens of conservative feminism. I chose this framework because it most appropriately explained the dichotomy between the conservative woman’s quest for gender equality and her focus on traditional family and community. In this current project, in which I expanded the population of participants to
include a broader range of “generations” – both human and automotive – I found this dichotomy to be even more pronounced. While the women adhere to, and are supportive of, cultural gender roles that endorse and promote identities of wife, mother, and accommodating partner, they claim women’s presence in classic muscle car culture as evidence of growing gender equality. Married women in particular acknowledged that access into classic muscle car culture was dependent on male support or permission. Thus rather than define equality in the liberal feminist sense, i.e. the opposite of hierarchy, the women in this project called upon other means to establish themselves as equal participants in classic muscle car culture. Such methods include calling upon the conservative construction of individualism to claim ownership of a classic muscle car, displaying automotive knowledge and savvy, and poking fun at men in the classic muscle car hobby.

The conservative feminist, Kersten points out, values the rights of individuals; in classic muscle car culture individual rights often translate into a woman’s prerogative to drive a car of her own choosing. Although the majority of married women who contributed to this project participate in muscle car culture alongside husbands, they were quick to point out that the car they drive belongs to them and take immense pride in personal ownership. As the 62-year-old owner of a Wimbledon White 1964 ½ Mustang remarked, “Before I had my own car I tagged along with my husband, but it changed my attitude when I got my own car. Cause then he had his and I had mine and I could say this is mama’s car. I could take pride in something that was actually mine.” The women emphasized they were instrumental in car selection as well as any modifications made to the vehicle – i.e. paint color, engine, interior - after purchase. They often rejected their husband’s recommendations regarding car models and styles and held steadfast until they took ownership of a particular automobile. As the 60-year-old owner of a 1971 Dodge
Charger Super Bee exclaimed, “My husband tried to tell me why don’t you buy a GTO. And I said if you want a GTO you buy a GTO.” Many of the women personalized their cars in a manner that would deter husbands from driving them. Vanity license plates were cited as an effective way to tag a car as female. The vanity plates on a 1965 Ford Mustang convertible contain the childhood nickname of its 47-year-old owner. As she noted, the reason she chose to identify her car in this manner was “so when my husband hops in the car they’ll know it’s not his. And my husband doesn’t even make the mistake of saying that it’s his, or ours. It’s always my car.” A “sparkly” Frost Blue 1968 Plymouth Barracuda has a princess license plate with the owner’s name prominently displayed. As the 50-year-old school bus driver asserted, “I have this thing about owning something. When I own it I like to mark it.”

When a classic muscle car is on display at a car show or other automotive event, the common assumption is that the owner is male. Although the car owner’s name is displayed prominently on the front window, spectators and fellow exhibitors invariably ask a husband, or whatever man happens to be in the vicinity, about the automobile. The 51-year-old owner of a 1969 Mustang Mach I remarked, “I got pulled over in Frankenmuth because the guy didn’t think it was my car. He thought it was a man’s car.” Younger participants, particularly the few who lean left, are more likely to challenge the hierarchy within classic muscle culture. The 31-year-old owner of a 1991 Firebird had just met a male friend at a car show, when a man came over and started asking the friend about the car’s engine. As she explained, “I said it has 3.1 V6. And he looked at me and he goes, ‘I’m talking to him.’ And I said, ‘yeah, but it’s my car.’ And he shook his head with a nasty face and walked away.”

Because women are relative newcomers to classic muscle cars, acquiring automotive knowledge while gaining the confidence to speak intelligently and knowledgeably about the cars.

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51 Frankie Auto Fest, held every September in Frankenmuth, Michigan.
they drive becomes a way to demonstrate that they are equal participants in classic muscle car culture. While there are doubters and detractors among spectators as well as fellow exhibitors, the women believe that increased car savvy among female participants will contribute to respect and recognition within the classic muscle car hobby. As the 49-year-old owner of a 1969 Dodge Charger notes, “I hope that when people come up to the car and especially now that it’s just my name on it, and if they would talk to me and realize yeah I’ve worked on it I don’t just get in the car and drive it. It makes them reconsider the image of women and cars.”

While this expanded study included women who did not fall within the dominant demographic of classic muscle car culture, the majority who participated identified as white, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual, and either moderate or conservative. Consequently, most women did not openly criticize or question the patriarchal construction of the culture; rather, they often called upon creative strategies to bring attention to women’s growing presence within it. A common tactic was teasing men about their attitudes toward women drivers with the hope of changing their collective mindsets. The women who contributed to this project often make lighthearted generalizations about male behavior and poke fun at “the way men think.” This strategy allows them to address male resistance to female participation without challenging men’s position of power within the culture itself. When a 56-year-old auto dealership biller is behind the wheel of her black 1973 Dodge Challenger, guys who pull up beside her assume it’s her husband’s car. As she laughingly remarked, “It’s kind of how guys think.” Of her 1969 Mustang Mach I, a part time automotive tester exclaimed, “men don’t think that women should have a car like that.” Equality for the women who participated in this project is not about breaking barriers or destroying gender hierarchies, rather, it’s concerned with changing “the way guys think” to become more accepting of women in classic muscle car culture.
Many of the women interviewed for this project developed a passion for fast and powerful cars as teenagers during the muscle car era. As the 58-year-old owner of a 1970 Dodge Hemi Challenger RT remarked, “I grew up in Royal Oak, Michigan, just two blocks off Woodward. We would cruise regularly and it’s something, I guess, we took for granted.” However, marriage and domestic responsibilities often forced young women to put an interest in fast cars on hold. A 73-year-old owner of a 1964 ½ Mustang was drawn into cars as a young woman when dating her future husband. As she explained, “But when I got married and then had kids, cars weren’t anything that I actually thought about.” A 62-year-old retired Ford employee participated in muscle car culture in her Chevy Malibu as a teenager growing up on Detroit’s east side. However, as she explained, “I didn’t get into it as much as a lot of them did. Only because I got married when I was 18. So I was, you know, a stay-at-home mom.” Other women noted that while they had little exposure to cars as teenagers, they became interested in the muscle car after marriage, often under the “encouragement” of spouses. Husbands often prompted their wives to participate in muscle car culture not only to rationalize their own automotive “habit,” but also to foster a common spousal interest beyond childrearing. These men often purchased or restored muscle cars for their wives as a way to cultivate enthusiasm for the classic car hobby. A 65-year-old retired interior designer came into ownership of a 1970 Chevelle after her husband – who had four old cars of his own - told her to “go pick out what I want.” While at a car show, the husband of a 51-year-old 1969 Mustang owner told her to “tell me what you like, and so we went looking around.” In addition, some women who grew up with a love for cars successfully converted their husbands into auto aficionados. The 50-year-old owner of a 1993 Mustang GT was brought up in a car family. As she noted, “I don’t know
anything different. And my husband wasn’t when he met me. But he quickly became addicted.”

Yet no matter what the route to classic muscle car culture, to married women in particular, ownership of a classic Mustang or Chevelle is considered an important component of marital stability and family happiness.

As the responses indicate, married women believe joint participation with husbands in muscle car culture - at classic car shows, drag races, swap meets, and cruise-ins - contributes to stronger marital relationships. Working together on a classic muscle car - whether changing the oil, replacing a radiator, or simply shining it up before an event - provides these women with the opportunity to get to know their husbands better. As the women in this project suggest, classic muscle car culture allows them to legitimately step outside the confines of domesticity to engage in what has been traditionally considered a masculine pastime alongside their husbands. Working on her black 1973 Dodge Challenger with her husband, noted its 56-year-old owner, is “always a project together; we do everything together.” The 43-year-old owner of a Spinnaker White 1974 Plymouth Barracuda remarked, “Once I met my husband we have enjoyed muscle cars together and have had several.” Many of the women spoke of how a shared interest in classic muscle cars brought them closer to the men in their lives. As the 58-year-old owner of a Pastel Gray 1970 Mustang explained, “I always found it enjoyable, I mean we could sit on coolers and work on these cars and talk and really have nice conversations. I think it really did help our relationship.”

Participation in classic muscle car culture is often a family affair. The 56-year-old owner of a 1973 Dodge Challenger attends car shows not only alongside her husband, but is also often accompanied by her car-loving father, brother, sister, brother-in-law, son, and other family members. As she mentioned, “at one time there was like 12 to 15 of us that all went to car shows together.” A 62-year-old widow was encouraged to get involved in classic muscle cars by her
son as a means to “get out of the house” and “meet new people” after her husband’s passing. As she noted, “He was the only one; he was the one I started going [to car shows] with.” The 27-year-old owner of a 1971 Pontiac GT-37 began attending car events with her mother and grandparents. Now with a classic muscle car of her own, car shows have become something she and her mother “do together with our guys and we all have a good time.” Post boomer classic muscle car owners – i.e. women in their 30s and 40s - often bring young children to car events. These car themed outings not only function as important family time, but also help spark interest in the next generation of potential classic muscle car owners. A 65-year-old owner of a 1970 Plymouth Superbird noted, with a fair amount of pride, her son’s first words were “beep beep.”

The classic muscle car community was described as “family” by many of the women who contributed to this project. The 65-year-old owner of a 1970 Plymouth Superbird referred to fellow classic muscle car owners as “family members.” As she explained, “especially in the spring after a long winter, you see if everyone’s all right, what’s happened to their families; it’s a family kind of a thing.” Classic muscle car events are often depicted as “family reunions.” As the 49-year-old owner of a 1969 Dodge Charger remarked, meeting up with car folks each year, “feels just like you’re seeing family again.” The women interviewed for this project certainly expressed a strong interest in cars; however, the married women in particular placed greater value on classic muscle car culture as a social group centered on family and community. This was demonstrated by their behavior at car events. Couples often shared “easy-up” shade tents and sat together behind the cars. The women packed picnic lunches and drinks and socialized with the other female members. Children and grandchildren were often included; moms and dads could be spotted with youngsters strolling through the show grounds explaining the finer features of Challengers, ‘Cudas, and Camaros.
Classic muscle car clubs were cited by many of the participants as important sites of community. As the women noted, membership in these organizations provides them with automotive resources, social networks, fellowship, and purpose, in the form of charitable events. Married women with classic muscle cars often seek out organizations that encourage family membership. Whether an organized group of over one hundred families or a casual group of “car friends” that meet on an informal basis, car clubs offer married women a chance to get together with other couples to organize future classic car events, exchange automotive information, and talk about cars and family. It is important to note that the “family” promoted by these organizations is composed primarily of individuals who are white, Christian, conservative, middle-class, and heterosexual. Those outside this dominant construction often feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. The 54-year-old owner of a 1967 Pontiac LeMans – one of the few lesbians interviewed for this project – has refrained from seeking membership in a classic muscle car organization because, as she remarked, “I have not felt comfortable doing so as a single female, as members are overwhelmingly either guys or couples.” The 51-year-old owner of a 1966 Chevrolet Impala, who also identifies as lesbian, has chosen to belong to a gay car group rather than a classic muscle car organization focused on family. Younger women in the classic muscle car hobby often refrain from club membership. The 37-year-old owner of a 1974 Nova noted that as most club members are older, she would prefer to “find something in my group.” The 22-year-owner of a 1966 Mustang has not joined any car clubs, for as she believes, “most car people do not take young people seriously.”

Constructing classic muscle car culture as a community focused on friendship and family provides married women with the opportunity to construct themselves as important and necessary to the culture’s growth and function. Although a woman behind the wheel of a classic
Mustang or Camaro challenges the common perception of the woman driver, the assumption of traditional gender roles within classic muscle car culture legitimizes and promotes women’s participation. The women often take on gendered tasks within the classic muscle car community; they pack and serve picnic lunches, clean and polish cars, organize events for women’s and children’s charities, and serve as secretaries or newsletter editors for classic car organizations.

Audre Lorde writes, “only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women” (111). The women recognize that their power in muscle car culture stems not only from the cars they drive, but also from the acceptance rather than repudiation of their identities as women, wives, and mothers. They recognize and embrace sexual difference and use it to advantage. Through embracing and enacting the social category “woman,” they have reconfigured the “woman driver” as one who has a passion for cars, and who uses her gendered position to strengthen the family unit within and outside of car culture and to contribute to the community in a caring and meaningful way. In this manner, the women alter the meaning of the classic muscle car from a vehicle of male self-aggrandizement to one that promotes a conservative construction of “woman power.”

While they do not identify as feminists, the women who own and drive classic muscle cars recognize the possibilities available to them through the acknowledgement of sexual difference. By celebrating, rather than repudiating, their social identity as women, they have not only successfully integrated themselves into classic muscle car culture, but have created an important and invaluable role for themselves within the classic car community. Whether married or single, the women who own and drive classic muscle cars have invoked the gendered role of caretaker to reconfigure muscle car culture from an exclusive, hyper-masculine brotherhood into a community that values friendship, family, cooperation, and hard work. In doing so, they
successfully incorporate the maternal into the social; they call upon sexual difference to not only initiate their own entrance into classic muscle car culture, but to transform the muscle car community to the benefit of all. In these contexts, female classic muscle car owners have determinedly reconfigured the woman driver from an individual who embodies the caretaker role in the car she drives, to one who calls upon such a role to transform a car-driving community.

The Classic Muscle Car and the Woman Driver

Gender, write Lerman, Mohun, and Oldenziel, can “be seen as a set of meanings attached to actions, things, and people” (2). During the 1960s and 1970s the muscle car was a symbol of youth, masculinity, American ingenuity, and power. For the aging boomer men who now covet them, classic Chargers and GTOs are nostalgic reminders of that often embellished past. Yet as Sheumaker and Wajda note, factors such as class, race, sexuality, and gender, influence individuals to “‘know’ objects in different ways” (xvi). Thus for the women who came late into this historically masculine culture, the classic muscle car is valued for its past, as well as for the meanings it holds for them in the present. Whether it serves as a tribute to a male family member, a means to acquire and distribute automotive knowledge, a component of new subjectivities, a symbol of gender equality, or as a contributor to stronger relationships, families, and communities, these women view the classic muscle car as a vehicle that influences how they construct themselves as women drivers. Thus this examination of women’s relationship to the classic muscle car – as does that of women and the chick car - not only disrupts the longstanding association between the automobile and masculinity, but also demonstrates how women have the ability to reinvent or reimagine cars for their own use and meaning-making.

In his analysis of the public discourse surrounding the racing career of female professional driver Deborah Renshaw John Sloop writes, “the car was born within a culture of
bi-gendered norms and has been consistently marketed and understood through the lens of those norms” (195). The American muscle car was manufactured and promoted almost exclusively to the young male driver. Consequently, a woman’s body in the driver’s seat of a Charger or GTO is in a place where it does not “naturally” belong. Its presence, as Butler might argue, troubles gender expectations. As Sloop notes, when gender expectations are troubled, the disciplinary constraints of culture “operate to encourage the gender-troubling parties to rearticulate their behavior to fit the expectations of proper gender behavior” (198). The women who contributed to this project do rearticulate their gender performances, but not in ways that might be expected. Like their male classic-muscle-car-driving counterparts, the women gun engines, burn rubber, challenge others at stoplights, and draw undue attention to themselves. They engage in behavior that, on the surface, is “gender troubling” and identifies them as atypical women drivers.

However, the women who participated in this project challenge the notion of gender troubling through the claim that their driving performances are, in fact, gender appropriate. As they argue, ownership of a classic muscle car – and the acquisition of automotive knowledge and driving skill that accompanies it - provides women with access into a historically masculine enclave. Once in that culture, the women call upon the traditional roles and skills applauded by conservative feminists – spousal support and deference, promotion of family and community, female socialization, and the taking on of traditional female tasks – to create a legitimate space for themselves within it. Thus rather than alter driving behavior to conform to cultural conventions, these women change the meaning of their own driving performances. In doing so, they reframe the construction of the woman driver to one who not only appreciates fast and powerful cars, but who, most importantly, calls upon the classic muscle car as a means to perform gender appropriately and “naturally” within the confines of classic muscle car culture.
Figure 5. A sample of classic muscle cars owned by participants.
CHAPTER 5: THE PICKUP TRUCK
From Man’s Workhorse to Cowgirl’s Companion

In the summer of 2013, Chevrolet introduced a 30-second commercial promoting the Silverado, the longtime hallmark of the auto manufacturer’s line of pickup trucks. The commercial created a minor stir within both the advertising community and population of truck owners. The notice garnered by this particular commercial was not a result of outrageousness of execution or offensiveness of subject matter. Rather, it captured everyone’s attention because it featured a woman driver doing something extraordinary and unexpected. Unlike most automotive advertising directed toward the female consumer, the woman was not a suburban mom hauling kids to a sporting event in a minivan, nor was she a harried professional packing groceries into a crossover on her way home from work. Rather, she was a rugged, independent, resilient, and competitive young woman pulling a massive horse trailer down a country road while behind the wheel of a full size pickup truck.52

“A Woman and Her Truck” represents a day in the life of a young woman and her horse. It follows the pair as they travel to a barrel-racing event, compete, and return home. Accompanied by country singer Will Hoge’s “Strong,” the copy is simple and direct:

A woman.

A woman and her truck.

A woman, her truck, and a 1200-pound passenger.

And two bodies with one mind.

And a ribbon that goes on her wall, not in her hair.

52 Considering “A Woman and Her Truck,” Slate contributor Amanda Hess writes, “This year, Chevrolet released a rare truck commercial for women, featuring a lone rodeo rider who travels with her truck and her horse in search of ‘a ribbon that goes on her wall, not in her hair.’ Boyfriends and babies are nowhere in sight. This woman represents the flip-side of all those studies—she is less likely to want kids, less likely to prize marriage, less likely to trust that she can succeed at work while taking on responsibilities at home.”
The all-new Chevy Silverado.

With the best available towing in its class.

Strong. For all the roads ahead (Chevrolet’s Cars).

Although women are the fastest growing segment of pickup truck buyers, they have been notably absent in truck advertising. When they make an appearance, it is most often as a passenger, ornament, or a homemaker using the pickup truck in much the same way as a station wagon or minivan; i.e. as an aid in the performance of domestic tasks. To many of the truck-driving women who happened upon the Silverado commercial on YouTube, the recognition of women by an automaker as a legitimate pickup truck owners was considered nothing short of groundbreaking. As one commenter exclaimed, “Wow! Chevy noticed women have more than an ornamental place in relationship to trucks” (Judith). Another wrote, “Why is it strange to market trucks to women? Especially women who ride horses? Think it is the men who drive the horses and us to trials, shows, and clinics? No, we do that ourselves” (Jocelyn M). And perhaps it was this woman who expressed the collected sentiments most succinctly: “It’s about F-ing time!” (Hope B). Although the American pickup truck has traditionally been associated with a particular construction of conservative masculinity – hardworking, hard drinking, gun toting, and tough – “A Woman and Her Truck” suggests a growing recognition, if not acceptance, of women as pickup truck owners and drivers.

The association between the pickup truck and masculinity has its origins in the vehicle’s longstanding production and promotion as a “mechanized workhorse” (Rasmussen 7). As Seitz notes in a 2012 article that women have grown to represent ten percent of truck buyers over the past decade. Adweek, in its review of the Silverado commercial, boosts that number to 15 percent (Bazilian). Ken Harden, vice president of sales and marketing at Rhino Linings USA Inc., states that “professional women in their 20s and early 30s are making the biggest impact in this market and offer the most opportunity for sales growth” (qtd. in Hedges). As the three best selling vehicles of 2014 were full size pickups (1 Ford F-150, #2 Chevy Silverado, #3 Ram), the number of pickups purchased by women is significant (Kelley Blue Book).
and Moses note, the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century – “whose factories manufactured everything from soup cans to nuts and bolts” - created an enormous need for an effective and efficient means to transport products (xvii). Automakers responded by converting the passenger car into a serviceable vehicle by fitting the chassis with a cargo bed. The increasing demand for such vehicles by small business owners, ranchers, and farmers resulted in the production of factory-finished trucks. Photographs and advertising from the period feature trucks positioned in varied work locations – e.g. lumber yards, construction sites, coal mines, oil rigs, garages, industrial sites, farms, and cattle ranches – accompanied by rugged workmen loading, hauling, and driving these durable machines. Advertising copy includes a liberal sprinkling of adjectives such as tough, strong, dependable, sturdy, efficient, capable, and powerful to describe the truck as well as the man behind the wheel. If women had a role in these scenarios, it was as the receivers of goods provided by male truck operators. The repeated association of male traits with the pickup truck in early promotional material suggests the pickup was an important site for the construction and performance of masculinity.

The pickup’s widespread use as a troop carrier during World War I solidified its reputation as rugged, reliable, and serviceable. Its popularity increased considerably after the war; men who called upon the pickup to perform a job also found it useful beyond the farm or worksite. While the pickup continued to be promoted as a practical workhorse, its versatility became an important selling feature. Ads from the 1930s and 1940s display the many applications of pickup truck use – hauling, pulling, delivery, and service – while continuing to promote its strength, reliability, long life, safety, and low cost of operation.

Although pickup trucks were built with men in mind, women were fully capable of operating them. This was first demonstrated during World War I, when young, single, and well-
educated middle and upper class American women volunteered their services as drivers in the women’s motor corps. Stationed primarily in France, these women – who possessed the necessary linguistic and automotive skills - were deployed as ambulance drivers, chauffeurs for medical personnel, and were frequently called upon to deliver supplies to distant hospitals and devastated areas. As Kimberly Chuppa-Cornell writes, “female drivers made significant contributions to France both during and after the war [as they] filled a void left by men and governments too occupied by the war to intervene” (476). During the Second World War, writes C. Kay Larson, women in the military achieved distinction for the “non traditional work they took over” and for which they had no previous training, which included positions as auto mechanics and truck drivers. Of course, very few of the women in the civilian defense industries or military went on to become professional drivers or mechanics. Like the majority of women who aided in the war effort in the United States and overseas, they were encouraged to return to domesticity once the servicemen returned home.

The pickup truck maintained its chief function as mechanical laborer until shortly after World War II. New attention to styling, comfort, and personal options indicated that automakers desired to appeal to a broader spectrum of drivers. No longer just a workhorse, the pickup was promoted as a recreational vehicle as well as a family automobile. The mass migration out of urban areas in the post war era created the need for a second car in suburban households. While most women were handed the keys to a nine-passenger station wagon, some relied upon the pickup truck for the performance of household tasks. Advertising during this period often drew attention to the pickup’s double duty. Headlines such as “Stands up as a tough truck. Stands out as a second car”54 are accompanied by images of both men and women loading gender appropriate items into the cab of a pickup. A Chevrolet truck ad from the 1960s - “A Chevy

54 1960 Ford print advertisement.
pickup is built to be womanhandled” - features a woman behind the wheel of a pickup at a farmer’s market while a man loads crates of oranges into the back. The copy in these ads is careful to marry the “feminine” qualities of comfort, easy handling, and affordability of the vehicle with its masculine toughness, strength, and durability. Words and pictures in these advertisements clearly define what kind of objects are appropriate for women to carry in the back of a pickup (shopping bags, antiques, groceries) and those suitable for men (sporting equipment, hardware, building materials). As demonstrated in the majority of automotive advertising directed toward the female consumer over the past century, women’s automobility is acknowledged primarily when the vehicle is used in the performance of appropriate gender roles. As Deborah Clarke notes, “while the automobile was changing the world, it was still subtly promising that the gender order, at least, would remain intact” (“Driving” 16).

During the 1980s, pickup manufacturers responded to women’s increased buying power through the production of what Ella Howard refers to as “Pink Truck Ads.” These advertisements, Howard writes, “embodied the tensions of their era, as advertisers profited from women’s increased financial independence yet depicted them primarily within a narrow range of normative gender roles” (137). Howard argues that the Chevy S-10 Blazer campaign – which attempted to convince women trucks were not unfeminine by bathing the vehicles in pastels - represented the era’s conservative backlash to women’s social and economic progress. Not surprisingly, the heavy-handed, patronizing approach was ultimately unsuccessful. Yet rather than reconsider how the female consumer might be effectively addressed, auto manufacturers and marketers simply eliminated women as drivers from pickup advertising. Relying on the
longstanding assumption that women will purchase the vehicles that men buy,\textsuperscript{55} manufacturers returned to the tried and true concepts of toughness, ruggedness, strength, durability, and unbridled masculinity to market the pickup truck.

While, over the past two decades, women have been mostly absent in pickup advertising in other than the most stereotypical ways, women’s presence has increased among the rank of truck engineers and designers. During the late 1990s, interest in the pickup truck as a lifestyle vehicle among women grew. In response to this emerging consumer base, female engineers were brought on board to develop and incorporate features that resonated with female consumers.\textsuperscript{56} The product “concessions” made to female consumers acknowledge that the pickup truck is attractive to women as a “family vehicle,” and also as a means of transportation that reflects who they are, what they do, and how they want to travel on the road of life. It took until 2013 for a truck manufacturer (and its advertising agency) to recognize that pickups hold a variety of uses and meanings for the women who own them, and to use this connection to appeal to a particular segment of the woman driver population.

The Chevrolet Silverado commercial – “A Woman and Her Truck” – has insightfully and intelligently expanded the female pickup driver category from wife and mother to “cowgirl.” This particular designation is noteworthy. The commercial acknowledges that the relationship between women and horses is a longstanding one, demonstrated by the thousands of women of all ages who spend their weekends competing at horse shows and other equine events. Although,

\textsuperscript{55} Ford advertising account executive Jack Keenan, in an interview with Gerl and Davis, noted that he, along with the majority of ad men, never designed a car ad for a specific audience; rather, he worked on creative ideas for the “great American consumer” (215).

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{USA Today} auto journalist Earle Eldridge writes, “It’s difficult to pinpoint when women became a presence on pickup engineering and design teams. Until last year [2000], no one kept tabs on the number of female automotive engineers” (“Pickups”).
as Elizabeth Larsen asserts, horse-sport businesses remain dominated by men, youth horse projects such as 4-H are close to 90% female. In her investigation into the woman-horse bond conducted among women who participated in the 4-H horse project as girls, Janet Lambarth notes how horses provide women with “a significant method for buffering life’s stresses and augmented their own strengths in coping” (5). Nearly one third (7 out of 25) of the women interviewed for this project are involved in various horse-sport competitions or activities.

Perhaps more significantly, the cowgirl has long been associated with the hardworking, courageous, resilient, and fiercely independent women who helped build the American West. The cowgirl – as represented on the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame website – is a woman who “resists femininity through a no-nonsense independence and rugged individualism” (Moore 474). The construction of the cowgirl as both unconventional and traditional has appeal to both sides of the ideological spectrum. The image of the western woman able to forge an independent, adventurous, and colorful life out of struggles against great odds, as well as “to find liberation from the drudgery of housework, the life that women had to live,” embodies what Laura Moore espouses as “cowgirl feminism” (477). And the association of the cowgirl with hard work, resilience, and individualism – tenets of contemporary conservatism - makes her an appealing and acceptable representative of the largely right wing truck driving population. While pickup truck marketing has historically presented women primarily as wives and mothers, the 30 second “A Woman and Her Truck” commercial suggests that women not only prefer the pickup for its strength and versatility, but often call upon it as an important site of identity and meaning making. As it focuses on a popular and acceptable alternative of women’s truck use, the

57 Noted in Larsen’s “Fast Horses and Strong Women: Revisioning the Sport-Family-Business of Harness Horse Racing.”
58 Noted in Lambarth’s “4-H Women and Their Horses: An Extraordinary Relationship with an Extraordinary Animal.”
commercial hints at the infinite possibilities for the woman behind the wheel. The women who contributed to this project expand upon these possibilities as they produce and present alternative constructions of the woman driver.

The Pickup Driving Woman

A sampling of truck marketing over the past 100 years supports the general consensus that the pickup truck was produced specifically for the male driver, not only as a workhorse, but also as a site for the affirmation of masculinity. Advertising for pickups often relies on masculine tropes and gender stereotypes to appeal to men with headlines such as “A diamond for her hand, a hemi for his foot,”59 and “Yeah, it’s good to be King.”60 A commercial from a few years back featured two men standing at a restroom urinal, with a poster of the Dodge Durango on the wall, as one says to the other, “mine is seven inches longer” (Halliday “Raunchy”). Research firm J.D. Power and Associates describes the target audience for the Chevy Silverado as “married guys between the ages of 25 and 54 who blast country music in the cab and work on do-it-yourself projects at home” (Halliday “Full Size”). When referring to the Ford’s F-series vehicles, an auto consultancy representative exclaims, “These are not girlie trucks. This is about testosterone” (Halliday “Men”). As these examples suggest, automakers have worked diligently to associate truck ownership with traditional if not clichéd notions of masculinity through marketing that frames the male truck driver as tough, powerful, and secure in his manhood. As noted in “The Psychology of Marketing Pickup Trucks,” truck makers “understand how the American male wants to feel about himself and reflect that ideal in their advertisements.”

While, in the twentieth century, pickups were driven almost exclusively by men, their recent appropriation by a segment of the female population is often perceived as a threat to

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59 2014 Dodge Ram print advertisement.
60 2014 Ford F-150 print advertisement.
masculinity. One of the common responses within truck culture has been to personally brand a vehicle as masculine. In “Pickup Trucks, Horses, Women, and Foreplay,” Jeannie Thomas notes that although trucks are valued for their usefulness, decorative additions made by male owners don’t always follow solely utilitarian functions. Garters, mud flaps with images of large-breasted women, and “truck nutz,” plastic accessories that resemble a dangling pair of testicles attached to the rear bumper of the vehicle so they are visible from behind, are just of a few of the ways in which men personalize their trucks. These additions, Thomas argues, “help negotiate and present group membership, notions of masculinity, and patriarchal images of women” (213).

The strong association between pickups and masculinity – used as a selling tool by automakers and reinforced in popular culture – has led to a common practice of referring to women who own pickups in crude and stereotypical ways. As indicated on a popular online forum, while some men believe female pickup drivers are “sexy as hell,” most question the femininity of such individuals (Fist-Of-Freedom). When asked “what do you think about women that drive pickup trucks?,” commenter NotYetThere replies, “those type of women usually have higher testosterone. I like my women with as much estrogen as possible.” As a contributor to an online research essay site remarks, driving a truck as female suggests “you are either the cute lil' thang in Daddy's big pick-up, or you are a bull dyke” (“Stereotyping”). Although women are recognized as the fastest growing segment of the full size pickup market, they remain outliers or outcasts among much of the male truck driving populations. Consequently, they are often treated with disrespect on automotive blogs, forums, and other forms of male dominated social media.

In their research into the differences between pickup truck and automobile driver-owners, Anderson, Winn, and Agran conclude that pickup truck owners are primarily male, aged 30-39, married, often engage in risky driving behaviors – i.e. drinking and driving, and refusal to use
seatbelts - and are likely to have only a high school education. While male pickup owners can be found in all parts of the country, their greatest concentration is in “red” states. Thus they are more likely to be conservative and champions of traditional gender roles than automobile-only drivers. The interviews conducted for this project suggest that female truck owners are not as easily compartmentalized as their male counterparts. Although women who drive pickups are more visible in southern and western states, including Louisiana, Texas and California, they are not concentrated in one area of the country. The 25 project participants included female pickup owners from twelve geographically dispersed states and one Canadian province. Of those who provided information, eleven lived in urban or suburban areas while 13 were in rural locations.

The owners of chick cars and classic muscle cars who participated in this project shared a number of demographic categories within their respective vehicle categories. While the data collected for this project was too small to be generalizable, it should be noted that the group of truck owning female participants were significantly more diverse than those in the other two aforementioned driving populations. Of the women who participated in this project, 21 identified as white, one as Hispanic, two as Asian and one as African-American. 18 of the women listed their sexual orientation as heterosexual whereas seven identified as lesbian or other (i.e. bisexual, queer, transgender). Although 84% of the women chose domestic trucks over imports, ideologically they were less likely to ascribe to a conservative ideology than female classic muscle car owners or men with American made trucks. Of those who provided information, six identified as conservative, ten as moderate, eight as liberal, and one “none of the above.” This

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61 As noted in “Pickup Trucks Have Become Transportation for the Masses.” Paul Hollis writes, “In fact, if you compare state-by-state pickup truck registrations with votes in the 2004 presidential election, you’ll see that George W. Bush won the top states in ratio of pickup trucks to cars” (5).

62 Although there is no conclusive evidence which links a conservative ideology to male domestic truck owners, as noted earlier, Gallop Poll results of car preference by political ideology during the 2004 presidential election concluded that conservatives are more likely to drive domestic vehicles. This is in agreement with the Hollis article that associates conservatism to domestic truck ownership (which is 85% - 90% male).
group of drivers skewed younger than owners of chick cars and classic muscle cars. They ranged in age from the early 20s to 60, with the majority (68%) under the age of 50. 17 were married or in long-term relationships, whereas nine were unmarried, widowed, or divorced. Over half of participants (12 of the 23 who provided information) had an annual income of over $40,000.

The 25 participants were recruited on Facebook pages, truck forums, and most often, by word of mouth. Chick cars and classic muscle cars have active car cultures, easily accessible through social media and local car events. While truck manufacturers host a plethora of online forums, active contributors are not always welcoming to the female truck owner, which I discovered first hand after attempting to post a request for participants. However, while there is a scarcity of women who post on truck forums, I received much support, as well as participation, from those who do. While visiting these sites I took extensive field notes, considering how often women posted; how women’s online contributions were received by other participants; what information they provided regarding their vehicles and truck use; and how they presented themselves as pickup truck drivers.

The field notes data and interview responses from female truck owners provide evidence that women relate to pickups in a myriad of ways. To the women who own them, pickups fulfill a need, functionally and emotionally, that a standard automobile does not. Many of the women interviewed confessed they felt unexpected affection for their trucks and could not imagine their lives without one. The women use them as daily drivers, for work, for adventure, and for fun. Ownership of a pickup provides women with the opportunity to earn a living, and earn respect in their lives and on the road. The pickup often serves as reflection of female competency and

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63 My request posted on the F-150 Forum sparked an interesting discussion on my dissertation topic choice. ErictheOracle wrote, “Unbelievable: your Ph.D. thesis is vehicle selection under a variety of cultures? This is the new knowledge you hope to bring to the human race?” Oldsmuggler remarked, “I’m perfectly happy that the relationship between women and cars has not ignited any interest in scholarships…nor should it.”
capability, as well as a source of identity and empowerment. It allows women to present themselves as mothers, as well as something other than a mom. As I conducted interviews with this group of women in person, by phone, or electronically, I was struck by the innumerable ways women call upon pickups in their daily lives, and in the process, redefine what a woman driver is and who she can be.

The Pickup Truck and the Automotive Experience

Lukach writes, “Unlike more frivolous automobiles that gained their notoriety by being faster, fancier, or more exotic, the pickup truck had to prove itself to a potential buyer as capable of enduring hard work” (109). As historical and cultural automotive records suggest, the pickup has a longstanding association with masculinity and men’s labor. Photographs and advertising have typically featured trucks positioned in varied work locations – e.g. lumber yards, construction sites, coal mines, oil rigs, garages, industrial sites, farms, and cattle ranches – accompanied by rugged workmen loading, hauling, and driving these durable machines. Advertising copy includes a liberal sprinkling of adjectives such as tough, strong, dependable, sturdy, efficient, capable, and powerful to describe the truck as well as the man behind the wheel. The continued emphasis on the pickup as a workhorse for the male driver ignores the multiple ways women experience truck ownership and the driving experience.

The women who participated in this project expand the notion of the pickup as a “mechanized workhorse” to a vehicle that not only aids them in the performance of work, but also provides them with the opportunity to help others, participate in particular pastimes, present themselves as competent and capable, and to experience the road in an entirely new, and often empowering, way. Through car choice, car use, and driving behavior, this group of women demonstrate that while pickup ownership has traditionally been called upon to define men as
“hardworking, all-American, unpretentious, [and] ready-for-anything” (Lukach 109), it also has the potential to irrevocably change the perception of the woman behind the wheel.

**Pickup Truck Choice**

In rural areas and small towns in the southern or western United States, a woman behind the wheel of a pickup is a fairly common occurrence. In “Why Today’s Women Love Their Trucks,” Edmunds.com editor Joanne Helperin writes, “in some parts of the country (Texas comes to mind), practically everyone drives a truck.” As indicated by the responses from the women who reside in California, Georgia, North Carolina, and Idaho, selecting a pickup as a daily driver was an obvious choice. The pickup’s versatility, functionality, and toughness accommodate the rural woman’s lifestyle. Although the daily lives of suburban and urban women differ considerably from those of their country sisters, they find common ground in their appreciation of many qualities exclusive to the pickup truck.

As auto writer David Schmidt notes, “a pickup may be used as a truck only part of the time, but it’s a full-time ride.” The potential of the truck to perform a variety of tasks, as well as serve as a daily driver, was a deciding factor in the decision to purchase a truck rather than a standard automobile among the majority of female participants in this study. As a 42-year-old software engineer remarked, “the flexibility in this truck is awesome. [It] can handle truck duties, but it still feels like I’m driving a nice car.” A 53-year-old nurse living in rural North Carolina has always owned trucks. As she explained, “they’re just very useful. I used to have horses and my husband has a camper. We have a boat. And we haul gravel. So it’s just multi-purpose.” A 24-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 Super Duty chose a truck for its versatility. She noted, “you can pretty much do anything, especially with the newer ones now, they’re so comfortable and luxurious.” A 53-year-old day care worker mentioned that the versatility of a truck allows her to
do things on her own rather than contract others to do them for her. As she exclaimed, “If I had just a car it wouldn’t be economical for me. I’d have to hire someone to bring the mulch to me; buying landscaping stuff, I’d have to hire somebody for that, to haul my four-wheeler around.” As these female truck owners suggest, the versatility of a truck is valued not only because it allows them to fulfill the role of “multi-tasker” easily and economically, but it also provides them with a measure of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Citing the benefits of having her own truck, a 47-year-old retail manager explained, “It means that both my husband and I can go different directions on a weekend as we both have trucks that will pull trailers. One of us is not having to give up what they enjoy doing so the other one can go.”

The women often cited the pickup’s reputation for durability and dependability as a reason for choosing it. Many live in areas where the conditions are harsh and the weather unpredictable; having a truck allows them to navigate safely and effectively through severe conditions. A 47-year-old resident of a small hamlet in Alberta, Canada depends on her truck to get her through the winter months. Owning a pickup, she remarked, means “I can get to town and to work when we have lots of snow. [A truck has] better clearance to get through snow drifts.” Rural life also contributed to a 21-year-old Ford F-150 owner’s decision to purchase a pickup. As she noted, “I lived on a farm in an area where we deal with lots of mud and snow and a 4x4 is needed sometimes.” Of the decision to purchase an old Chevy pickup, a 39-year old trained pipe fitter stated, “I want something that’s solid, dependable, that you don’t have to worry about too much.” Many of the respondents also appreciated that as workhorses, trucks don’t need to be kept as pristine as a coupe or sedan. As a 43-year-old groundskeeper noted, “I like to be able to just throw stuff in the bed and go, and not worry about getting the inside of your vehicle dirty.” Of her first Ford F-150 purchased when her kids were young, a 38-year-old professional
counselor remarked, “I loved it because [the boys] could make a mess in it and I could literally take a hose and just spray it down.” Durability in a pickup is important to women not only for its handling of adverse conditions, but also for its ability to take on whatever the elements – and children – throw at them.

Although the women who participated in this project enjoy the opportunity to get their pickups dirty, they also indicated that appearance is a very important consideration in vehicle selection. A 35-year-old horse trainer, who drives a Ford F-150 King Ranch Dually, remarked, “I really like the way this truck looks. It is very comfortable on the interior, because it’s upgraded; it’s not a base model truck.” One of the considerations in the selection of a 2014 Toyota Tundra made by a 53-year-old registered nurse was based on “the style, the look of the truck.” The ability to improve the appearance of the pickup through options and aftermarket modifications was often mentioned. A 48-year-old network analyst remarked, “I love big chrome grilles, all the versatile and mods you can do with a pickup truck, attractiveness, rugged (lots of things a truck can do that I would not do with a car), and interior space.” A 24-year-old truck owner who works in law enforcement noted, “Aesthetically I think the F-350 looks the best. […] We’ve done our little modifications to it. It’s got a leveling kit and 35-inch tires on it; it will eventually have a lift.” As a 43-year-old Ford F-150 XLT owner noted, she made cosmetic changes to the truck because, “I wanted it to look nice. But at the same time have presence.” As many women indicated, adding modifications including lifts, big tires, and having the truck “jacked up” was an effective way to change the look of the truck and get it noticed. Although a few of the women interviewed for this project preferred midsized pickups, for the majority (19 out of 25) participants, choosing a full sized pickup was a top priority.
The 40-year-old owner of a 1999 Ford Ranger appreciates the smaller proportions of her midsized pickup. As she noted, “most trucks nowadays are too big and curvy. I like a boxy little truck.” Of her Ford Ranger, a 39-year-old university instructor remarked, “I like that it’s small; I like that everything that’s in there with me I can reach.” However, the overwhelming preference for full sized trucks was based on the vehicle’s ability to haul larger loads, pull bigger trailers, clear higher snow banks, and for the way they make the women who drive them feel. The 25-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 Superduty remarked, “I’ve always really been into large trucks. And this truck is totally the biggest one out there.” Of her 2013 Dodge Ram 1500 4x4, a 37-year-old medical billing specialist explained, “I have been told I have ‘short person’s syndrome.’ I’m 5’3’’ with a truck with 20” rims.” Perhaps the 48-year-old owner of a 2012 Ford F-150 XLT said it best. “I love big trucks. Bigger is better.”

The women who preferred full size pickups often linked “bigger” with safety. The feeling of safety and security was attributed to the pickup’s higher station – which contributes to increased visibility - as well as the sheer amount of sheet metal that encompasses and protects the driver. Reflecting on her Ford F-150, a 38-year-old counselor remarked, “I liked it being higher up so I could see everything. I do have a fear of car accidents so I felt safer in it.” When she’s behind the wheel of her Dodge Ram 1500 4x4, a 37-year-old medical billing specialist feels “protected and more alert in my surroundings since the visibility is so much better.” The common perception that the full size pickup is as “tough as a tank” provides an added sense of security to the woman driver (Eldridge “Pickups”). A 53-year-old registered nurse lives in the Great Dismal Swamp where she has been hit by deer on at least six occasions. As she exclaimed, “I feel safer in [my truck] because several times, if I had been in a car I might not be living.” The
35-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually asserted, “I like the security of having a big truck. Because you know [if] somebody taps it it’s not going to crumble.”

Safety has traditionally been considered a prime consideration in automotive purchase for the female consumer. In their examination of features considered important when buying an automobile, Brenda Vrkljan and Dana Anaby conclude, “Across all age groups, women rated safety as significantly more important than men” (63). Although safety in automobiles is most often associated with features such as airbags, seatbelts, anti-lock brakes, as well as adaptive headlights, reverse backup sensors, forward collision avoidance systems, and side view and parking assists, the women who contributed to this project focus on the size and stature of the pickup as its most important safety attributes. The link of size to safety was often repeated, despite evidence which points to the pickup as “the most dangerous vehicle on the road.” While the participants did not link gender to dangerous driving specifically, they believed that women drivers are, as a whole, more cautious, attentive, and aware than men behind the wheel. These qualities were emphasized in conversations regarding their own driving habits; as the 27-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 4x4 Supercrew remarked, “Since I’ve gotten my truck I’ve become more aware of what I’m doing and how I’m doing, as well as pay close attention to my surroundings.” Thus rather than acknowledge research which marks the full size pickup as dangerous, the women relied on the combination of personal attentiveness to driving and the size and substance of their vehicles to endorse the full size pickup as solid, sturdy, and safe.

While the women frequently mentioned size as a positive attribute, it also contributed to most of the negative aspects of pickup truck ownership. Regarding her Ford F-150 4x4, a 40-

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64 Tom Vanderbilt writes, “more people in the US die in pickups per 100 million vehicles than in any other vehicle” (258). However, the role of gender has a significant impact on accident statistics. As Vanderbilt notes, “men tend to drive pickup trucks more than women, men tend to wear seat belts less often, men who live in rural areas are more likely to drive pickup trucks without seat belts, and after motorcyclists, the drivers of pickup trucks are the most likely to have been drinking when involved in a fatal crash” (261).
year-old horticulturist remarked, “It’s big and a gas guzzler.” Poor gas mileage was the number one complaint among pickup truck owners. As a 35-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually explained, “One of the negatives is that it just does not get great gas mileage. I mean that’s one of the things that you give up.” Of her Ford F-150 Supercrew, a 27-year-old police dispatcher added, “Filling up a 36 gallon tank really hurts my wallet and getting every mile out of it can be a pain.” Other common criticisms included increased insurance costs, problems finding a parking space, the lack of seating, and the difficulty of carrying groceries in an uncovered bed. Notes the 50-year-old owner of a Ford F-150, “Groceries, I just keep them on the floor cause they do rattle around. And also, cause I don’t have temperature control back there, when it’s really hot outside, I don’t want to be putting my groceries out there.”

In addition, as the 53-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 asserted, “if it’s the only vehicle you have at the house and you want to go to a wedding and you’re dressed up, it’s a little more difficult to climb into.” Yet despite the problems associated with the enormous dimensions of a full size pickup, the women who contributed to this project expressed little desire to downsize. They chose a truck for its size, strength, safety, functionality, versatility, power, and its ability to impress. As the 43-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 XLT with a crew cab, four wheel drive, and chrome package remarked, “I have a four-inch lift on the body and put on 35 inch mud tires. So it’s nice and tall; people stare at it when they go by. I can see over everybody.”

The common assumption in the auto industry is that women will select a vehicle based on its functionality, practicality, safety features, and style. However, these preferences are most often considered in the context of women’s role as family caretaker. As Sarah Jain notes, advertising for full size SUVs often combines women’s cultural responsibility for children’s

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65 While the pickup was designed to carry heavy loads such as building materials and sports equipment, its inappropriateness for transporting groceries reinforces the association between trucks, masculinity, and prescribed gender roles.
safety with the ability of the vehicle to “carry the family stuff” to promote its vehicles as perfect for active families (398). The women who contributed to this project demonstrate how these qualities can take on entirely new meanings when the vehicle of choice is a pickup truck.

**Pickup Truck Use**

Although the pickup has been historically linked to male use and men’s work, it is likely that rural women, whose work often went beyond the farmhouse, have long relied on the farm truck for transportation as well as to help out on the homestead. Writing about early automobility, Margaret Walsh notes, “Girls or women who could drive were able to run farm errands and to gain personal access when men were working on the farm” (“United States”). As the responses of the project participants suggest, country women not only continue to use their trucks in a variety of work situations, but also call upon them for home projects, as daily drivers, and for fun. Suburban women, long relegated to “family” vehicles, have taken a cue from their rural peers and have enthusiastically embraced the pickup for both its work and play functions.

A few of the women who participated in this project refrain from using their trucks as daily drivers due to the poor gas mileage associated with full size trucks. A 59-year-old facility supervisor calls upon her Dodge Dakota “mainly for winter driving.” Of her Ford F-350 Superduty, a law enforcement employee declared, “I don’t drive it every day. One because diesel is so expensive here in California but, two, it’s just, it’s not practical as an everyday driver.” A 40-year-old horticulturalist drives her truck “only to and from work and to the gas station.” As she exclaimed, “Oh my god how painful it is to fill up every time I’m at the pump.” However, for the majority of respondents owning two vehicles is cost prohibitive. Therefore, the pickup truck is often called upon in much the same manner as a car. The women use their trucks as work

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66 Michael Berger quotes a 1912 *Atlanta Monthly* article “The Passing of the Farmer” which notes that wives of farmers often neglect their housework as they must “give themselves to the land” (“Devil” 57).
transportation, as well in the fulfillment of household responsibilities traditionally associated with women’s work. These tasks include transporting children, grocery shopping, and “trip chaining,” i.e. “stopping off to do domestic errands on the way to and from work” (Walsh “Home”). Of her 1995 Toyota Tacoma, a 23-year-old college student explained, “It is my commuter vehicle. I drive it every day.” A 48-year-old IT specialist noted, “My truck is my daily driver and is used for everything I have to do.” A 39-year-old resident of West Virginia drives a 1988 Chevrolet C1500 “around town, on the Interstate, mainly for work, go for errands, stuff like that.” As auto writer David Schmidt notes, women like pickups “because pickups do many of the things women must do in their lives rather well.” Although these women get behind the wheel of a vehicle traditionally associated with masculinity, they often find themselves using it in the performance of gendered tasks.

Whereas some women rely on the pickup truck primarily as transportation to work, for others the pickup is indispensible to accomplish the paid work they do. The 53-year-owner of a black Ford F-150 is in the boat repair business with her husband. Not only does she drive her pickup 20 miles to work, but uses it to tow boats to the storage facility or bring back to the shop for repairs. When it became necessary to defrost the grounds of a professional sports stadium after an especially cold winter, the head groundskeeper used her own Ford F-150 to move and position trailer heaters on the field. A 47-year-old inventory control manager relied upon her pickup after embarking on a shared business venture with her spouse. As she explained, “we thought that we were going to be an adventuresome couple, and we were going to split wood and sell it to customers all over. And surprisingly, [the business] took off.” To a 35-year-old farm manager and horse trainer, owning a pickup strong enough to pull a large horse trailer was a necessity. As she exclaimed, “[this truck is] what I went out and worked to buy, because I knew
it would be necessary in the future for me to make money. So I guess to me my truck means that I’m going to make a living for me and my children.” In her groundbreaking work on domestic technologies, Ruth Schwartz Cowan describes the motor car as “the vehicle through which the [American housewife of the middle classes] did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could most often be found” (“More” 85). The women who participated in this project demonstrate that vehicles are not only valuable for women’s unpaid domestic work; rather, when that vehicle is a pickup truck, it often serves as a crucial means to women’s financial security and livelihood.

Many of the women who contributed to this research are engaged in home projects and hobbies that necessitate the transfer of large, bulky, messy, or heavy items from one location to another. Ownership of a pickup allows these women to tackle a variety of home do-it-yourself projects. As a 55-year-old automotive technician explained, “I mean, especially if you’re a homeowner you need something to move.” A 53-year-old day car worker relies upon her Nissan Frontier in the spring to transport gardening materials, mulch, and manure; in the winter it carries firewood and her Christmas tree. A 50-year-old professional counselor depended on her Ford F-150 when building a patio. As she exclaimed, “I’d go to the rock shop and get aggregate and shovel it into my backyard.” Women who own horses, such as the 66-year-old driver of a 2013 Chevrolet Silverado LT2, use their vehicles to pick up feed, hay rolls, equine equipment, and farm supplies. Pickup trucks are also useful for large, spur of the moment purchases. As the 37-year-old owner of a Ford Ranger remarked, “A few weeks ago I was in Cincinnati, and we had taken our car instead of the truck, and we went to IKEA, and there was this couch that I loved. And I was like if I had the truck I could take this home.” Owning a pickup provides women with a sense of control over what they do and when they do it. Rather than rely on others to deliver
goods, female truck owners manage their lives by taking such matters into their own hands. Automotive journalist David Schmidt believes women like having and driving pickups for reasons that have to do with independence and self-reliance. As Schmidt asserts, the pickup “says the driver is ready for whatever’s coming; they won’t have to run home and get the truck.”

The women who participated in this project not only rely on the pickup for hauling their own stuff, but also that of others. Helping friends and family members transport large items – whether sending a kid off to college, moving into a new home, picking up a large bulky item for a friend, or loaning the truck to someone in need – was often mentioned as one of the advantages (and disadvantages) of owning a pickup. As a 37-year-old Ford Ranger owner remarked, “I’ve helped lots of people move. I get all sorts of emergency calls where people are at the store and they’re like can you help me get this home.” A 47-year-old inventory control manager has called upon her Ford F-150 when “helping the kids move some stuff.” A 50-year-old licensed practical nurse relied on her Ford F-150 multiple times to move her son into the Naval Academy, and bring him stuff from home while at boot camp. Having a pickup, noted a 37-year-old university instructor, “means that I don’t have to rely on friends if I want to haul something. It means I get to pay back karmically all of the people […] who I have asked to carry stuff, or move stuff.” A 35-year-old horse trainer used her Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually to help others up and down the mountain during an unexpected snowstorm on an out of town family trip. As she exclaimed, “my kids thought it was the neatest thing, that we didn’t even live there, but our truck had to do all the work and get everybody up and down the mountain all weekend long.” The pickup’s use as a means to help others reflects traditional ideals of femininity; i.e. woman’s role as caretaker and the moral obligation to put others before oneself. Performing such altruistic actions in a big,
bulky pickup, however, suggests that the desire to help others is not only centered in femininity, but in strength, power, toughness, and fortitude as well.

Since the earliest years of its production, the pickup has been valued as a strong and dependable workhorse. It retains this function among female owners, whether used in the field, on site, on the road, or in the backyard. However, to the women who own them, the pickup is also called upon as both a means to and a source of fun. Many of the women who participated in this project participate in recreational activities that require the transport of equipment or livestock. Dirt bikes, motorcycles, boats, snowmobiles, campers, outdoor gear, kayaks, and classic cars are just a few of the “toys” that can be found in the bed of a truck or pulled along behind it. A 27-year-old police dispatcher chose a pickup because “I needed a truck that would tow my dirt bike and also fit my dogs [in the back of the cab] comfortably.” As 24-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 Superbody remarked, “it pulls the Charger; it pulls the trailer; it pulls all the toys. That’s its primary use right there.” When her boys were young, a 50-year-old professional counselor would often throw a rowboat in the back of the truck and go fishing, or load up the kids’ bikes for a ride in a nearby park. To the women who own horses, a full size pickup has the power and strength to pull a trailer so that they can compete in horse shows and other equestrian events. As the 38-year-old owner of a Dodge Ram Half Ton explained, “I got it because it will pull my horse trailer. That’s the primary function of me driving a truck.” A 35-year-old Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually noted, “We show horses. And I needed to be able to pull a large horse trailer. So when it came down to it, it’s the truck I needed to have enough power to pull a big horse trailer.” A 53-year-old Ford F-150 owner stated, “I used to pull a horse trailer. And I would go horse camping. It was kind of an event. It was all women. It was fun.” To these
women, the pickup is not only personal transportation, but is transport for the things that add enjoyment and meaning to their lives.

Pickups are not only a means to fun, but are often the source of fun itself. Many of the women use them for activities such as off-roading, four-wheeling, and “mudding.” Of her 1991 Ford F-150, a 21-year-old retail worker remarked, “Usually it's used for playing in the mud or snow with my brothers and cousins.” A 47-year-old inventory control manager explained, “We went mudding once. Right up around the corner they have a mud fest. She did pretty good the first round.” Speaking about a past truck, a 24-year-old law enforcement employee noted, “I would go out to F-150 meets in the LA area. And did some off-roading with people.” Some of the women participate in car shows and cruises with their pickups. A 55-year-old automotive repair technician, who inherited and restored her father’s 1985 Chevrolet El Camino SS, attends “car shows, cruise nights, [and] specialty trips like the hot rod tour.” Talking about a 1988 Chevrolet C1500, its 39-year-old owner related, “I take it to car shows and cruise ins. Check out and see what everybody else has done. Get some ideas, advice.” Although advertising has, since the early 1960s, promoted the pickup as a recreational vehicle, the person behind the wheel driving, hauling, and using the equipment in such representations is invariably male. If women are present it is in the passenger seat or at the campsite preparing a meal. In a recent promotion, the Ford Division claimed that its Superduty pickup – promoted as the “macho work truck” – is also useful for “towing outdoor boys’ toys” (Halliday “Pickups”). However, as the participants in this project demonstrate, women call upon the pickup to create their own opportunities, in work as well as in fun.

In the introduction to his illustrated history of pickup trucks, Justin Lukach writes, the pickup is “a reliable friend, a hard worker that never complains, a representation of the tried and
true American work ethic” (front flap). Originally marketed to men as a hard working machine and reliable workhorse, it has since developed into a multi-purpose vehicle with appeal to a broader population of drivers, including a growing population of women. While advertising and marketing continue to link the capabilities of the pickup to the needs and desires of the male driver, as this project demonstrates, women use the pickup in both traditional and unexpected ways. The pickup truck provides women with the opportunity to participate in activities, perform tasks, and help others in ways not possible with the “family” car. It offers them the means to engage in nontraditional careers and alternative pastimes. As a 27-year-old owner of a 2012 Ford F-150 FX4 Supercrew remarked, the truck not only serves as a daily driver, but has also, “allowed me to go dirt biking, snowmobiling, help people move, and do my own landscaping.”

Cowgirls, rural women, female suburbanites, and city dwellers alike have discovered the many uses of the pickup and in the process have become self-reliant, autonomous, and empowered.

**Pickup Truck Driving Behavior**

The driving behavior of the male truck owner is well known, through representation in the media and popular culture and characterization in automotive research. In advertising and marketing, men are often found behind the wheel of a dirty pickup “sloshing through mud and driving up inclines” (Halliday “Nissan”). They are pictured throwing up dust, maneuvering on rough terrain, working hard on the farm, and getting dirty on the job. They are portrayed as able-bodied workmen, rugged outdoorsmen, tough competitors, and skilled if not aggressive drivers. As a recent Dodge Ram headline reads, “Long live the man who still lets his right foot do the talking”.

Traffic studies describe the pickup driver as “primarily male, aged 30-39 years, married, reported lower restraint use and more risky driving behaviors, and had more traffic citations” (Anderson et al 67). Taking both representation and real life into consideration, the

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67 2014 Dodge Ram print advertisement
driving behavior of the typical (and stereotypical) male pickup owner could be described as confident, aggressive, risky, careless, and shamelessly macho.

Evidence relating to the driving behavior of the female truck owner is less available. As truck-driving women are nearly invisible in the media and popular culture, information is drawn primarily from automotive articles and research focused on women as truck consumers – who they are and what they are looking for in a vehicle - rather than as drivers. As the responses from the project participants suggest, pickup truck ownership often changes the way women feel about driving as well as the way women drive. The size and station of the pickup, its capabilities and characteristics, as well as the skills necessary for handling a large, heavy, and powerful vehicle, contribute to driving performances rarely ascribed to the woman behind the wheel.

The pickup attribute most often repeated by the women in this project as an influence on driving behavior is “sitting high.” The high station of a full size pickup offers a different view of the road than that of a sedan or minivan. This driving position, which provides the sensation of being on top of traffic rather than enmeshed in it, affects how women behave behind the wheel in a number of ways. The ability to look down on traffic provides women with a sense of control over the truck as well as other vehicles on the road. As a 37-year-old medical billing specialist exclaimed, she chose a Dodge Ram 1500 4x4 because “I like to be up high so I can see everything, and be all knowing on the crazy streets around me.” Of her Dodge Ram Half Ton, a 38-year-old vet tech remarked, “you can see more of what’s going on the road. Cause you can see over and around most of these smaller vehicles.” As sitting high is not a feature of smaller pickups, owners of those vehicles were less likely to attribute a feeling of security or control to the driving experience. As a 23-year-old student noted about her Toyota Tacoma, “I feel unsafe at the moment given its age, condition, and the condition of Michigan roads.” Of her Ford
Ranger, a 40-year-old university professor declared, “I try not to have too many adventures because it is a little rear-wheel drive truck – not a lot of capability.” To the majority of women who participated in this project, however, it was the high seating provided by a full size pickup that allowed them to take control of their own driving behavior.

As many of the women noted, sitting high provides sense of control, which contributes to their confidence as drivers. As a 43-year-old Ford F-150 owner exclaimed, in a pickup “you can see above everybody. You can see if traffic’s sped up. You can anticipate quicker than cars can.” Because of the bird’s eye view sitting high provides, women believe themselves capable of averting trouble before it happens. Sitting high awards them the confidence to drive assertively rather than passively. It encourages them to become more engaged drivers and in the process, improve their driving skills. When she inherited a Ford F-150 after her husband’s death, a 50-year-old licensed practical nurse was hesitant to drive it. Yet, as she confessed, “once I started teaching the kids to drive it and everything, I really, really, really wanted to drive it. I realized that I really liked it and it wasn’t nearly as hard to drive.” The confidence women attain when sitting high leads to an acknowledgement of themselves as skilled and competent behind the wheel. As the past owner of four Ford F-150s remarked, “Because a truck is a little bit more difficult to handle. You have to be able to be a good driver, I think, to drive a pickup. I think it’s a little more challenging. I think it does take bigger skills, and like there’s more blind spots, and it’s just a little bit more to handle.” A 48-year-old owner of a red Ford F-150 exclaimed, “I have had people say, ‘you must be a good driver to drive a truck every day’.” As the responses from the participants suggest, the confidence inspired by “sitting high” alters how women regard their own driving ability, thereby influencing how they think of themselves as women drivers.
The increased visibility of a pickup made possible by its higher station provides many women with a sense of power, particularly women of shorter stature. Accustomed to feeling lost behind the steering wheel, straining to see over the dashboard, and frustrated with numerous blind spots in a standard sedan or minivan, sitting high allows the smaller woman to experience, often for the first time, advantages of size and power when behind the wheel. As the five-foot-three-inch owner of a Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually remarked, “I get a lot of people ask me, ‘why’s such a little girl driving such a big truck?’ And it kind of makes me laugh; I’m not little and drive a big truck just so I can be somebody else. I really do have it because I really need it for work. But at the same time, I kinda am a little bigger than everybody else.” Sitting high in a big truck often emboldens the woman driver to be a little “pushier” behind the wheel. As the 5-foot-two-inch owner of a Ford F-150 exclaimed, “I guess it boosts my ego, sitting way up there. Cars usually either get out of your way, or if you’re trying to get over, they move because think you can’t see them, but you can.” A 35-year-old horse trainer explained, “I’m a little pushier driver when I’m in the truck. Cause I know people will move out of my way more readily.” And a 21-year-old retail worker declared, when behind the wheel of her Ford F-150, “I feel like I scare people in little cars and guys always stare to see a girl driving a lifted truck.” Sitting high in a vehicle designed and produced for a large, male body often results in a feeling of empowerment in the female pickup driver. As a 37-year-old Dodge Ram 1500 4x4 owner exclaimed, “I love being up high to see and I have the power to drive just about anywhere.”

While the majority of women chose a pickup for its workhorse qualities, women’s behavior behind the wheel is not always related to the vehicle’s functionality. The women revealed deep affection for their trucks and intimated they experience both satisfaction and happiness while driving them. One of the ways this pleasure is expressed is through the
association of driving with loud music. As a 48-year-old Ford F-150 XLT owner declared, “I enjoy driving my truck listening to music.” The association between big pickup trucks and music – particularly country and rock n’ roll - has a long tradition in truck advertising and marketing. Bob Seger’s “Like a Rock” served as the theme song for Chevy trucks from 1991 to 2004.\textsuperscript{68} More recently, country star Toby Keith crooned “I’m a Ford Truck Man” in a number of television commercials in the “Built Ford Tough” advertising campaign.

Whether automotive advertising agencies exploited the connection between music and trucks as an effective marketing strategy or whether pickup drivers have internalized the association from ad campaigns is difficult to determine. However, as the participants in this project suggest, the link is particularly strong among the women who drive pickups. As a 50-year-old registered nurse remarked, “Some days I just want to blare country music and feel like I’m really bad cause I’m driving my Ford truck. And some days I just want to blare rock ‘n roll music when I’m driving my Ford truck.” Although most vehicles produced today are equipped with technologically advanced sound systems, many of the women upgraded those systems to achieve the best sound quality possible as a means to improve the driving experience. The 43-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 XLT added a sound system that included two amplifiers, a sub woofer, a CD player, and an MP3 player. A 55-year-old automotive repair technician, who has performed most of the work on her 1985 Chevrolet El Camino SS, explained, “it has a much better sound system in it, because I’m also a musician so we regard having a really quality, not just that boom-boom stuff, a really quality sounding sound system in it, so [my son and I] put a lot of effort into that in the vehicle so that we could truly enjoy it.” Of her Dodge Dakota 4x4, a 59-year-old facility supervisor exclaimed, “The truck has a great audio system that plays music very loudly – it makes me drive with confidence.” Although listening to music while driving is a

\textsuperscript{68} As noted by Jalopnik auto writer Tom Joslin in “Chevrolet ‘Like A Rock’ from the Mid-90s.”
fairly common, if not universal experience, it appears to hold special meaning for the women who own pickup trucks. As the responses from the women who participated in this project indicate, music – produced by a state-of-the-art sound system - contributes to their assertive driving behavior, and enriches their driving experience.

Pickup trucks are, for the most part, purpose driven vehicles. Although they are used for personal transportation, the majority of women who drive them also rely on them to perform a particular job or function. The participants in this project construct themselves as women drivers through the work the truck allows them to perform, and their ability – as individuals who inhabit smaller bodies than the typical male truck driver - to handle a vehicle of considerable size competently, efficiently, and safely. The woman who relies upon her full size pickup to pull a horse trailer – whether for work or for pleasure – considers herself a capable, if not exceptional, woman behind the wheel. The woman who handles a big and bulky pickup truck skillfully and assertively – on rural roads, in city traffic, or in suburban parking lots - disrupts expectations of what a woman driver should be. As the 43-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 remarked, “I think that the fact that I can drive that big truck, it’s extra long and extra tall and that I can get in and out with inches to spare, I think [others] have a newfound respect. Or have put me on a different level than most of the typical, what they think of as typical women drivers.” Much like the women in chick cars and classic muscle cars, the women who drive pickups define their driving performances not as masculine, but rather in opposition to distracted, multi-tasking moms in Suburbans, crossovers, and minivans. A 24-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 Superduty who works in law enforcement describes her driving behavior as “aggressive, ready-to-go” and “bad ass.” Of her Ford F-150, a 50-year-old practical nurse remarked, “I don’t feel like a mom driving it.” The participants in this project believe their performances behind the wheel of what has long
been recognized as a “mechanized workhorse” present them as hardworking women capable of handling just about anything.

The Pickup Truck and Meaning Making

To the men who drive them, the pickup truck often serves as a symbol of a particular configuration of masculinity. As Kathleen Franz writes, consumers often use motor vehicles to “promote their own agendas, reshaping the machine to fill their needs and desires” (“Automobiles” 53). In her investigation of Western livestock culture, Jeannie Thomas notes how male pickup owners often call upon their vehicles as a means of signification. Through practical additions – i.e. mud flaps, tool boxes, running boards, and gun racks - as well as the incorporation of personal objects - i.e. custom lights, elk and eagle imagery, garters, and cowboy hats - pickup owners create what folklorists refer to as an assemblage, “simultaneously creating and reinforcing even deeper levels of meaning” (Santino qtd. in Thomas, 214). The purpose of the assemblage within this particular context, Thomas argues, is “to negotiate a position of cowboy masculinity within a male community” (223). Although their work investigates truck driving as a gendered occupation, the examination of the truck driving song as an affirmation of manhood - offered by Jason Eastman, William Danaher, and Douglas Schrock - has applications to men who call upon trucks for both work and pleasure. As Eastman et al argue, the truck driving song affirms the association of the truck with masculinity through its essentialization of truck driving as difficult, dangerous, and therefore most suited for men, as well as the construction of women truckers as “mis-nurtured gender deviants” (416). In “Men’s Soaps,” Hamilton Carroll suggests that the popularity of automotive television programming is based on its ability to reproduce a “recuperative blue-collar masculinity that attenuates the putative losses suffered by working-class men under the postindustrial service economy of the contemporary
United States” (263). Although the association between the automobile and masculinity originated over a century ago with the introduction of the gasoline powered motor car, the full size pickup has since emerged as the ultimate expression of male identity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the meanings most often associated with the pickup truck are those centered on its function as a producer and reproducer of masculinity in the male pickup driver.

Although women are slowly gaining acceptance as legitimate pickup owners by the auto industry, efforts to entice the female consumer have primarily focused on product attributes rather than establishing or encouraging a relationship between a woman and her truck. The suggestion that there are meanings related to the pickup unconnected to masculinity places automakers in the untenable position of alienating the bread-and-butter male consumer. Too much focus on women’s pickup truck use from automakers or the media has the potential to feminize, and consequently devalue, a brand among potential male customers. Throughout automotive history, notes Scharff, when considering women’s automotive influence on automobile production and consumption, “what was seen as feminine, or as belonging to women, seemed trivial at best, dangerous at worst” (“Wheel” 167). Yet to the women who participated in this project demonstrate, ownership of a pickup has little to do with notions of masculinity or femininity. Rather, the meanings ascribed by female truck owners focus on what the pickup makes possible; they view the Ford F-150 or Dodge Ram or Chevy Silverado as a source of adventure, respect, competency, new knowledge, identity, and empowerment.

The Pickup as a Means to Adventure

A 37-year-old university instructor recently purchased a used Ford Ranger at an auction. She had no intention of purchasing a pickup, but became excited when thinking about its “potential.” As she remarked, “I saw a picture on some Internet list of fun things to do and there
was a picture of somebody sleeping in the bed of a truck with like a pad in it. And it just looked, I’ve never done that, but I like that I could.” A 38-year-old veterinary technician, who purchased a Dodge Ram Half Ton for its ability to pull a horse trailer, often combines the vehicle’s functionality with fun. As she explained, “Friends and I go camping down at Waterloo with the horses. And two years ago, me and two of my friends went down into Ohio kind of out on our own away from the area and went to the regional eventing championships and showed down there. And we had an absolutely wonderful time.” As the comments from these two participants suggest, the pickup provides women with the opportunity for adventure in their lives. Whether their interests run toward camping, kayaking, snowmobiling, dirt biking, off-roading, or horse riding, the capabilities unique to a pickup make such activities possible. The pickup’s ability to tow, haul, and carry heavy equipment allows women to imagine what they can do with a truck and where it might take them.

“Lifestyle vehicle” is a term most often applied to cars and trucks that have special appeal to the active, on-the-go, fun-seeking individual. While men are expected to use vehicles in a recreational capacity, popular constructions of the woman driver suggest that the only “cargo” a woman should carry in her vehicle are groceries and children. Although many of the women who participated in this project cited the limitations of the pickup for such use – inadequate cab space for kids and the difficulty of securing groceries in a pickup bed – the opportunities for adventure presented by the pickup often outweigh such reservations.

Despite all its practical applications, there is a romanticism connected to the pickup truck. When asked how she feels when driving her Ford F-150, a 47-year-old inventory manager replied, “like Americana.” The pickup’s association with the West – the wide open spaces and can’t-fence-me-in attitude – often inspires women to think outside of conventional car use and to
imagine the kind of escapades a pickup might provide. As Thomas writes, “the truck has its own special place reserved in the lore of the West” (222). Malia Mills, known for her swimwear designs rather than vehicle choices, was interviewed in the *New York Times* about her Ford F-250 Superduty. As she remarked, “you can really be yourself in a pickup. It really makes you feel like you can go anywhere and do anything. There are limitless possibilities” (Colman). The women who contributed to this project agree. The 37-year-old university instructor contemplated the possibilities before bidding on a truck at auction. As she explained, “And as I was looking at it I got really excited about the idea of having a truck, because I could carry things. And I go on a camping trip every summer and I worry about having room in the car for it. But if I had a truck I wouldn’t have that worry anymore.” A 40-year-old college professor, who hopes her 1999 Ford Rangers “will last forever,” exclaimed, “It’s romantic; there are only two seats.” The 27-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 exclaimed, “this truck has allowed me to go dirt biking, snowmobiling, help people move and also do my own landscaping. I took my first road trip out to see my Dad in Washington. He returned with me and we drove through Yellowstone. That was pretty awesome.” To this group of women, pickup ownership means that their lives will not be mundane or ordinary. Rather than simply a source of transportation, they viewed the pickup as the means to participate in a wide variety of sports and activities and adventures that add excitement, enjoyment, and meaning to their lives. As a 27-year-old police dispatcher remarked about a her Ford F-150 4x4 Supercrew, “it allows me to enjoy doing the things I love to do.”

*The Pickup as a Learning Tool*

For the women who have lived most of their lives in rural areas, pickup trucks are a way of life. Most grew up surrounded by men - fathers, brothers, boyfriends, and husbands – who spent a great deal of time under the hood or behind the wheel of a Ford F-150, Dodge Ram, or
Chevy Silverado. A 53-year-old Toyota Tundra owner from rural North Carolina remarked, “[I had] boyfriends with pickups; my husband had a pickup when we met. I had a lot of friends with pickups.” Many of the women who participated in this project gained knowledge of pickups from these truck-driving men, or learned on their own in spite of them. As the owner of a Ford F-150 Supercrew remarked, “As a kid I would try and learn how to work on vehicles – but since I was a girl, my step dad wouldn’t let me go beyond handing him tools. It was rather frustrating.” A 24-year-old owner of a Ford F-350 Superduty explained, “I pretty much learn as I go. You know my boyfriend he did teach me a lot. So I attribute a lot of that to him. But I always wanted to learn and I do still learn now, so I can know what I’m doing in the future.” Although the pickup is pervasive in many parts of the country (particularly in Texas, writes Heitmann, “where a wide-body Ford pickup is better known as a ‘Texas limousine’”) the engrained association between trucks and masculinity – as well as masculinity and mechanical ability – deters most women from working on their own vehicles (190). Yet as many who participated in this project indicated, mastery of auto mechanic fundamentals adds to women’s self-confidence as well as her enjoyment and engagement with the truck.

The majority of urban women who participated in this project rely on local dealerships and repair shops for vehicle maintenance. However, a good number of participants from rural areas in particular expressed satisfaction in being able to maintain their own vehicles. The pride with which many of the women spoke of their mechanical ability is intertwined with the reputation of the truck as a workhorse. These truck-driving women project themselves as hardworking, through the jobs they do, the tools (and vehicles) they employ to do them, and their ability to adeptly handle both the job and the truck. A 23-year-old Toyota Tacoma owner exclaimed, “Almost all work done on this vehicle was done by me with the exception of
replacing the rack and pinion when I moved to Michigan. When I say ‘all the work’ was done by me I mean the original body work and paint involved when I first received the car (which was crashed) and then some oil changes and things here and there.” A 21-year-old Ford F-150 owner exclaimed, “I don't trust other people working on my vehicles because I know them inside and out and if something is wrong I can fix it myself. No need to pay someone else to do it.”

Those with skills that need improving participate on truck forums and pickup truck related Facebook pages to ask questions, share information, and gain knowledge. The benefits of participation, noted a 48-year-old IT specialist, “is keeping up with current mods, new items and accessories for trucks, chat with other truck owners, get ideas for my own truck, read others experiences with a truck, and look at other beautiful trucks.” As many of the female truck owners noted, working on their own vehicles not only gives them a great amount of satisfaction, but also demonstrates to others that they are knowledgeable, hard working, and accomplished. A 24-year-old law enforcement employee remarked, “I had a 2008 F-150 like I said. I got it completely stock brand new, when I was 19 years old. And I built into my dream monster truck. […] I definitely got a lot of ‘oh is that your boyfriend’s truck.’ I put a lot of love into that one. I did my own work on it and everything. And, I guess that’s not typical of your female driver.” A 39-year-old licensed pipe fitter views working on her 1988 Chevrolet C1500 as “a chance to show the rest of the people around in my community that hey listen, even though I’m transgendered, I can work on a car. I mean around this area you mentioned transgendered they think, oh, you don’t want to get your fingernails dirty, all you run around in is pink, you don’t want to get filthy dirty, or anything. Well there are those of us who crawl around under the hood of an old truck or car or muscle car, to see how much we can squeeze out of the thing.” As Clarsen notes, since the earliest days of automobility, women have used whatever means possible to gain recognition as
legitimate automobile owners and drivers. Writes Clarsen, “Women, who were portrayed by manufacturers and their husbands as passive consumers, remade themselves into competent mechanics and active users” (“Dust” 11). The women who work on their own vehicles do not view their actions as masculine. Rather, much like their early twentieth-century predecessors, they consider such efforts reflective of competence and hard work.

Many of the women who participated in this project rely on the pickup not only as a learning tool for themselves, but also as a means to teach others. A 50-year-old licensed practical nurse inherited her husband’s 2001 Ford F-150 after his unexpected death. She kept it in the family, and used it to give her children driving lessons. As she explained, “I taught [both my girls] how to drive the truck, and then they drove it during their teen years. And then my younger son, when he got old enough, that’s what he learned to drive in. And then I finally got to drive it. Yeah, you know, we all kind of like driving it. It’s just kind of special to all of us.” The 1988 Chevrolet El Camino parked in an Atlanta driveway is a “family heirloom” that will never be sold. As the 55-year-old owner remarked, “my son and I use it as a learning project for his, for growing up. So we’ve rebuilt virtually the entire truck.” A 50-year-old professional counselor inherited her first truck from her older brother. As she explained, “My brother was a mechanic. He actually owned a brake shop for a while. And I worked for him there for a couple years. Yeah, that’s why I had that first truck, when I was twenty. He kind of gave me that. It was kind of his, and he kind of gave it to me because I was working for him, and I was running parts and running errands and stuff like that. It ended up becoming mine.” She passed along the interest in cars gained while working for her brother to her sons, who are now employed as mechanical engineers in the auto industry. While the pickup is most commonly considered in its role as a workhorse, it holds a variety of meanings to the women who own and drive them. It serves not
only as a symbol of women’s capabilities, but also provides them with the means to impart what they’ve learned through experience and hard work to others.

The Pickup as a Source of Respect

In automotive history, the media, and popular culture, the pickup is indelibly linked with men’s work. As the responses from the project participants indicate, women also rely on the pickup as a necessary tool for a particular job or occupation. Whether they work in construction, landscaping, boat repair, or horse training, the pickup is integral to the work they do. If their job involves hauling, towing, transport, or delivery, a pickup is not only a luxury, but is crucial to a woman’s livelihood. Many of the jobs performed by women in pickups are those traditionally held by men. Consequently, the pickup not only serves as a tool of employment, but also has the ability to award women, and the work they do, with respect, particularly among male peers. As a 43-year-old professional sports groundskeeper noted about her Ford F-150 XLT, “I’m a little person and I feel like guys take me a lot more seriously when I pull up in it.” A 40-year-old garden designer remarked, “I notice people responding right away when I step out of the truck – especially with potential clients – that they see me as someone who possibly knows what the hell I’m talking about.” The size of the vehicle, as well as its longstanding reputation as a workhorse, lends women an aura of competence and professionalism that a “mom” car does not.

Driving a pickup not only serves as a source of respect on the job, but also awards women respect on the road no matter what their occupation. The size and stature of a full size pickup is often intimidating to other drivers, and the women who drive Ford F-150s and Chevy Silverados often use the truck’s imposing presence to advantage. As the 43-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 remarked, “cars usually get out of your way, or if you’re trying to get over, they move because they think you can’t see them, but you can. So I feel like I get a little more respect
on the road, too.” A 42-year-old owner of a Honda Ridgeline noted, “people do tend to move out
of the way if sitting in the left lane in front of me. Or letting me into a lane.” And as the 53-year-
old owner of a Ford F-150 used in her family boat repair business explained, when I’m in a car
“people cut you off. They don’t cut you off in a truck.” Scharff notes that, in the early years of
automobility, in response to the case against female motorists, “succeeding generations of
women drivers, facing old arguments with new twists (sometimes presented from within their
own ranks), had to reinvent themselves at the wheel” (“Wheel” 29). Accustomed to being
ignored in a minivan or crossover, many women discover newfound respect – as workers and as
drivers – behind the wheel of a pickup truck.

*The Pickup as a Symbol of Empowerment*

Although women are now recognized as a growing segment of pickup drivers, the woman
who drives a pickup is often regarded as unconventional, particularly if she resides in an urban or
suburban area. It is not uncommon, therefore, for the female pickup driver to feel empowered by
her vehicle choice. Since the beginning of the auto age, cars have provided women with a source
of autonomy unavailable in other areas of their lives. As Scharff notes, citing a 1904 article
written by an early proponent of women’s automobility, women who learned to drive “gained
confidence, courage, and the ability to think quickly, as well as a sense of empowerment”
(“Wheel” 27). Yet much like early female motorists, women in the market for a pickup often
face considerable obstacles. These include insolent behavior from auto sales personnel,
objections to women’s truck use from husbands and significant others, as well as negative
cultural stereotypes that link vehicle preference to sexual orientation. However, as demonstrated
by the women who contributed to this project, selecting a vehicle over the protest of influential
others not only serves to increase women’s self-confidence as automotive consumers, but also leads to women’s stronger identification as pickup truck owners and drivers.

Many of the women who participated in this project described the type of treatment they received by auto sales personnel when shopping for a pickup. As a 27-year-old police dispatcher remarked, “I was starting to get frustrated, because a lot of the dealerships refused to come down off the sticker price or would try to sell me the top model. I don’t know if this is normal or if it was because I am female. But I honestly felt like it was because I am female.” A 48-year-old IT specialist “fell in love” with the Ford F-150. Yet as she noted, when she attempted to purchase the vehicle, “the local dealerships in Charleston seemed to not want to get me the truck I wanted for the price I wanted. So I went home, looked on the Internet, chatted with Internet sales for a bit, then went to Charlotte, North Carolina (which is four hours from Charleston, south Carolina), to get my new truck.” The “bait and switch” technique was a common ploy employed by auto dealerships when approached by female customers. As a 42-year-old software engineer related, “the Cadillac dealership wanted to sell me a 2009 Ridgeline for almost the same price as a brand new Ridgeline. So I went down a block and six hours later, bought a new 2012 Ridgeline from the Honda dealership instead. I got the model and color I wanted – so I am quite happy with my purchase.” As I discuss in “Women Auto Know,” women in the market for an automobile – no matter what make or model – are often subjected to sexist, dismissive, and patronizing behavior from automotive personnel. It is not surprising, therefore, that when attempting to purchase a vehicle so strongly identified with male identity, the female customer is considered unknowledgeable and therefore easily duped. However, when the women in this project were confronted by this unscrupulous behavior, they refused to give in. They relied on their own
resources, as well as a fair amount of persistence, savvy, and determination, to get exactly the truck they wanted at a reasonable price.

Due to the pickup’s cultural role as a source of male identity, husbands and boyfriends often consider trucks too masculine for female drivers and are thus uncomfortable when their wives and girlfriends set their sights on a Ford F-150 or Chevy Silverado. As a 53-year-old day care worker remarked, “I had an old boyfriend that hated me driving a pickup truck. He wanted me to have a car because he felt women were to drive cars and men were to drive pickup trucks.” She purchased a Nissan Frontier to demonstrate that “women can drive pickups, too.” As she remarked, “when I’m in my pickup truck, it’s like I’m just as good, or even better, than any man out there.” Of her Ford F-150, a 50-year-old professional counselor exclaimed, “[my husband] hated that truck, but I loved it. He wanted to get rid of it and I did not want to. It was my favorite car.” Since the beginning of the auto age, writes Scharff, “the woman driver seemed always something less than a driver” (“Wheel” 33). In the minds of many men behind the wheel, women’s appropriation of a particular vehicle devalues the car as well as the man who drives it. Although in the twenty-first century, women’s participation as drivers equals that of men, there is a segment of the male truck driving population that fears what women driving trucks will suggest about them. However, as the women in this project demonstrated, they want no part of such outdated gender presumptions. Through their refusal to succumb to cultural notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as to the demands and recommendations of those who benefit from such classifications, these women emerge as strong, autonomous, and empowered pickup owners and drivers.

Living in a remote or rural area often makes ownership of a pickup imperative; however, in a one-pickup family, that vehicle is most often driven by the male in the household. Many of
the women interviewed in this project demanded their own vehicle in order to lessen their reliance on others as well as enable themselves to work and play independently. A 47-year-old manager for a Western retail company, who lives in a small town in rural Alberta, found herself home without a truck when one of her horses became injured. As she noted, “I had to call a neighbor to lend me his truck so that I could get the horse to the vet.” A 37-year-old university instructor feels a special affection for her Ford Ranger. As she explained, “it’s the first thing that I bought myself, without yeah, like it was my decision to look for it, to consider it, it was my decision to buy it, and to keep it.” The insistence of a pickup of their own, despite obstacles and objections, provided these women with a sense of control over their lives. Of her Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually, a 35-year-old divorced mother of two exclaimed, “This is actually the first large truck that I have ever purchased for myself. I’m pretty attached to it because it was all my personal preferences. I got the truck I liked […] instead of just going and getting like the base model truck or whatever.”

In the interviews conducted for my master’s thesis – which focused on women’s participation on online car discussion groups – I discovered that a woman’s interest in cars sometimes leads men to question her sexual identity. When that vehicle is a pickup truck, there is an underlying suspicion – particularly among heterosexual males - that the driver is a “masculine woman,” assumed to be a lesbian. There is a prevailing stereotype within car culture that women who identify as lesbian drive “macho” vehicles such as off-road 4x4s and pickup trucks. The *Car Talk* list of the “Ultimate Lesbian Cars of All Time” – which claims “actual quotes” from email nominations – includes the Ford F-150, Ford Ranger, Chevy S10, and assorted four-wheel drive vehicles deemed by the *Car Talk* staff as “tough enough for a lesbian.” In a tongue-in-cheek car advice article in the lesbian publication *Girlfriends*, the author advises the readers to “Stick with
something basic. Pick-ups are good, hatchbacks are fine, but monster trucks are overkill” (Cage 48). A few of the female participants who identify as queer or lesbian acknowledged the stereotype while having some fun with it. A 40-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 4x4 remarked, “Ha! Even I make ‘lesbians and their big ass truck’ jokes!” A 40-year-old college professor noted that driving her Ford Ranger “makes some people think I’m a little more butch.” A 53-year-old author and dog trainer wrote, “the people that know me know who I am and what I like to do. I’m sure they think [driving a Ford F-250 Supercrew] is par for the course. LOL.” As the responses suggest, women who drive pickups recognize that such stereotypes exist. However, rather than dispute, confront, or challenge such characterizations, they either ignore or take ownership of them. As Jane Ward writes, “it is important to note that lesbians’ own use of ‘in-group’ jokes, labels, and stereotypes has sometimes functioned to build a collective identity and a shared self-referential culture of resistance.” The women – straight and queer - who participated in this project call upon the pickup as a means to drive over barriers - disrespectful sales personnel, controlling partners, and cultural stereotypes - and become empowered by it.

The Pickup as a Means to New Subjectivities

Auto journalists, armchair psychologists, and writers for men’s magazines often like to ponder, “what your car says about you.” The Discovery Channel website recently included an auto psychology quiz, based on evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller’s notion that “consumer practices display a consumer’s personality traits and creativity.” One of the findings, posted by the website’s “Curiosity Experts,” is that driving a minivan not only screams “soccer mom,” but also makes you “pretty much invisible to the opposite sex.” According to the staff at AOL Autos, driving a Ford F-150 says you are an employed man “who works hard for an honest living.” Men’s Health magazine provided “insight” into women’s personalities based on vehicle
choice. The female pickup driver, writes Liesa Goins “is an easygoing gal in an F-150 looking for a guy who’s as solid and dependable as her ride. She hopes to pick up a real man’s man who will take control in bed.” While many of these articles are written as tongue-in-cheek car guides to finding the perfect mate, the women who participated in this project do not in any way view truck ownership as a means to make themselves attractive to the opposite (or same) sex. Rather, they believe the traits they share with the pickup reflect important aspects of their identity.

Much like the perception of men who drive pickups, the women who participated in this project view themselves as rugged, hardworking, and tough. As a 35-year-old farm manager and horse trainer remarked, “I think the [Ford F-350 King Ranch Dually] is a nice truck to look at, on the surface. And under the surface it does a lot of work. And I think probably the same thing about myself.” Her Ford F-250 Supercrew, notes a 53-year-old author and dog trainer, says “I work hard and play hard, which is especially noticeable when I’m hauling my 300-foot horse trailer behind me, or have my kayaks in the bed of it.” A 53-year-old day care worker believes her Nissan Frontier states, “I’m not dainty. I’m a little rugged. There’s ruggedness on both sides.” The 24-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 has a “Cowgirl Up” decal prominently displayed on the rear cab window. Unlike men who drive pickups, the women in this project did not associate truck ownership with masculinity. While they often constructed themselves as “not girly” or “not the most feminine woman,” it was an identity carried with a certain amount of pride. To the straight women in particular, ruggedness and toughness were not indicators of what Judith Halberstam constructs as female masculinity, i.e. “women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine” (xi), but rather, were positive character attributes enhanced through pickup truck ownership. As a woman responding to the Chevy Silverado advertisement posted, “That’s right, America. Women own and use trucks. No, we’re not trying to be more like men;
we’re women tired of men believing us incapable” (Hart). To the women who own them, a Ford
F-150 or Dodge Ram suggests they are more than moms in minivans, or as a 24-year-old law
enforcement worker remarked, “I’m not your typical female in the fact that I’d rather drive [a
truck] than a Volkswagen Bug or Jetta or something little.” Truck ownership provided these
women with the means to identify themselves as tough, sturdy, industrious, and a little more
“badass” than the typical or stereotypical woman driver.

While the pickup suggests that the woman behind the wheel is tough and hardworking, it
also indicates that she enjoys life. As she looked back on two decades of truck ownership, a 50-
year-old personal counselor remarked, “When I drove it, I always felt I was younger and fun.
Whenever I was in the pickup I was happier.” The Ford F-150, exclaimed a 48-year-old IT
specialist, “says I am cheerful, passionate, outgoing, fun, and loving.” A 37-year-old university
instructor, who purchased a Ford Ranger on impulse at an auction, exclaimed, “When I think
about the fact that I’m driving it, I feel good, I like it.” A 59-year-old facility supervisor believes
her red Dodge Dakota 4x4 “shows a bit of the rebel side of my personality.” Since the 1960s,
when it was transformed from a spartan vehicle used strictly for commercial work purposes to a
part time recreation vehicle, the pickup has been appreciated for both its work and recreational
capabilities. The women who contributed to this project agree, and believe the pickup truck
provides them with the opportunity to display both sides of their personalities. As a 43-year-old
professional sports team groundskeeper declared, her lifted red Ford F-150 tells the world that
she is “serious but fun.”

To the women who own them, the pickup not only announces who they are, but where
they come from. Many of the women associated pickup ownership with a social position, place,
or state of mind. Of her F-150, a 21-year-old retail worker exclaimed, “It basically tells everyone
I'm a redneck farm girl. You can definitely tell that I grew up on a farm and I love that way of life.” A 66-year-old interior designer believes her Chevy Silverado identifies her as a “tough country girl. Strong and self-confident.” The strong connection between the pickup and “country” as place was evident in the responses from rural women. The assertion “I’m a country girl” served as a means to claim authenticity as well as separation from suburban “posers” with pickup trucks. Although suburbanites were unable to make the connection between pickups and a physical location, they often used class as a way to construct themselves as legitimate pickup owners. While she now lives in a Detroit suburb, a 50-year-old professional counselor noted that driving a Ford F-150 “made me perceived by others as kind of blue collar, which is what I am. I am very blue collar. So I think it kind of keeps me feeling true to myself.” Others connected truck ownership to characteristics associated with a particular ethnicity. A 39-year-old trained pipe fitter explained that driving a 1988 Chevrolet C1500 4x4 “harkens to my Russian and German heritage. You know, I’m resilient, I’m tough, and I’m gonna be around for awhile.” In her investigation of the servicescape, Micael-Lee Johnstone argues that a central theme within place-based studies “is the relationship between people and place” (1400). The participants in this project called upon the association between the pickup and location – physical, social, or genealogical – to create and maintain subjectivities as pickup driving women.

Marsh and Collett write, “it is almost impossible to look seriously at a car without making an unconscious thumbnail sketch of the kind of person who would own it” (44). Although the female truck owner has grown in numbers as well as in acceptance, a five-foot-two woman climbing out of a full size pickup is likely to turn heads. Many of the women interviewed for this project enjoy the element of surprise associated with pickup ownership, and claim exceptionality as part of their identity. A 48-year-old African American woman remarked,
“being a black female and into pickups like I am, other black people are amazed. Especially other black women. I guess they wouldn't figure I like to talk about trucks, mods, engines, horsepower and the such. And they figure I'm different because I love pickups any kind of way.” A 50-year-old grandmother noted, “Every once in a while people, they wait to see the truck go out like at work or different places and they see me get out of it and it’s wow. I don’t think they necessarily expect it.” A 39-year-old trained pipe fitter purchased a used Chevy C1500 adorned with mud flaps featuring “naked girl” imagery. Although the original intention was to peel them off, as the owner divulged, “I got to thinking, wait a minute. There’s a transgender chick driving this truck. I’ll just leave them on here, to screw with some people. I’ve had people see that, and me get out of the truck, and they’re thinking what the hell.” In a car culture which still expects women to drive minivans, crossovers, and SUVs, women behind the wheel of a Chevy Silverado or Dodge Ram often enjoy the element of surprise pickup ownership provides them and take ownership of that uniqueness. As the 21-year-old owner of a Ford F-150 exclaimed, “Women who drive trucks seem to have attitude and the ability to be themselves better.”

In American car culture, the meanings ascribed to the pickup have focused primarily on its function as a location for the production and performance of masculinity. Descriptors such as hardworking, tough, rugged, sturdy, and strong have been universally applied to the vehicle as well as the man who drives it. As a 48-year-old Ford F-150 owner remarked, “Most of my other pickup truck owner friends are men. I think most people view pickup trucks as a vehicle men would drive.” Traditionally, car culture has been unable to provide a context or a vocabulary from which to consider the meanings the female driver might ascribe to the pickup truck, other than in a gendered role as a family vehicle. “A Woman and Her Truck” - although focused on a very specific population of horse hauling female drivers – suggests there are other meanings
associated to the pickup worth investigating. In his work in material culture studies, Knappett argues there are different registers of objecthood that certain artifacts may enter and exit at any time. Looking at material objects in this way, Knappett writes, encourages us to “see the status of objects as transitory rather than fixed; to imagine that the status of objects relies not only on the objects themselves but on the manner of their articulation within human-nonhuman networks; and to conceive of objects leading lives that may be eventful and multiphased” (118). The pickup truck began as an automobile crudely converted to a serviceable vehicle for the transport of products during the Industrial Revolution. It became a rural workhorse when farmers and ranchers modified the horseless carriage by installing wooden cargo beds to suit their needs (Wagner). The increasing versatility of the pickup led to its popularity as both a recreational vehicle and second car. Through each of these transitions, the object known as the pickup assumed new functions and meanings for the man who drove it. When women take the wheel of the pickup truck, they compel us to look at “man’s workhorse” in alternative ways. No longer is the Ford F-150, Chevy Silverado, and Dodge Ram singularly linked to manhood, but is a vehicle that adds a myriad of meanings to women’s varied lives.

The Pickup Truck and the Woman Driver

As evidenced by the posts on YouTube and social media, the 30-second commercial – “A Woman and Her Truck” - has been embraced by a growing and enthusiastic group of female pickup owners. Although the commercial focuses on a specific population of pickup drivers – women who transport horses and compete in equestrian events – it has been received favorably by female truck owners in a variety of other contexts. On the AutoEvolution site, blonde g asks, “why is it strange to market full-sized trucks to women? Wake up – it’s not 1950 anymore and many women work industrial/trade jobs requiring trucks” (Florea). Not only did the commercial
create buzz among current truck owners, but also encouraged current car driving women to consider the possibilities of truck ownership. Darlene D writes, “I think this is awesome. I've always wanted a pickup truck. I am a city/urban woman and want one to circle the garage sale or just be able to pick up whatever I need and not call on someone for help. I also work in construction and a pickup would stand up better on site! Bring it on” (Florea).

As these comments demonstrate, the Chevy Silverado commercial resonates with women for a variety of reasons. The first is the acknowledged connection between women and horses. Many women recognize themselves in the 30-second spot, which validates their own emotions and experiences. JHAFarm writes, “I can tell you that the majority of trucks that pull horse trailers are driven and owned by women. I haul a big gooseneck myself. […] Several years ago the AQHA did a study and over 85% of registered horses belong to women...yay! Thanks Chevy for this awesome commercial!” (Florea). The second is that the woman in the commercial is presented as tough, hardworking, and extremely capable. This suggests that the work a woman does – whether in construction, in landscaping, in auto mechanics, in the horse arena, or on the homestead - has value. And finally, constructing the pickup owner as a cowgirl offers the truck-driving woman an identity that isn’t linked with motherhood or domesticity. As a 50-year-old licensed practical nurse remarked about her Ford F-150, “It doesn’t scream mom.” In an interview preceding her induction into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, the legendary Dale Evans defined cowgirl as “an attitude, a pioneer spirit, a special American brand of courage.” As Evans asserted, “the cowgirl faces life head-on, lives by her own lights and makes no excuses. Cowgirls take stands; they speak up. They defend things they hold dear” (qtd. in Wommack 66). Centering the commercial on the figure of the cowgirl, therefore, implies that the Chevy Silverado is as tough, hardworking, and spirited as the woman who drives it.
The qualities Evans calls upon to construct the cowgirl fittingly describe the women who participated in this project. Through the trucks they drive and the ways in which they use them, these women display strength, determination, fortitude, and a passion for work and for life. Their driving performances do not mimic those of truck-driving men, but offer an alternative and viable construction of the woman behind the wheel. The meanings they ascribe to the pickup provide insight to the transitory nature of an object, and how a particular group’s use of it can alter, disrupt, reinvent, and reimagine it. Although the pickup has a long and tenured association with masculinity, the women in this project – rural, suburban, and urban – claim the cowgirl persona as their own. In doing so, they announce themselves as capable, hardworking, adventurous, and empowered woman drivers.
Figure 6. A sample of pickup trucks owned by participants.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Have You Heard the One About the Woman Driver?

My wife had a nasty accident with the car this morning. She backed it out of the garage, completely forgetting that the night before, she had backed it in (Jokes).

After a sex-change operation from male to female, the subject complained that it was now impossible to parallel park (Stone 120.)

The woman driver stereotype is often considered an anachronism. While jokes about women drivers were popular during the early motor age as means to curtail women’s automobility, women’s current status as over half the US driving population would suggest that woman driver humor is no longer relevant and serves little purpose. Women are highly valued as automotive consumers, and as statistics continually demonstrate, are considered safer and more conscientious drivers than their male counterparts. Yet despite women’s reputation as an important automotive market share, there is an underlying suspicion that women are inferior drivers. This is alluded to in a recently published study in which Zachary Estes and Sydney Felker claim that a lack of confidence as drivers contributes to women’s poor performance on mental rotation tasks such as parking the car and reading maps.69 It is suggested in advertising and marketing in which the woman driver is linked with safety and practicality rather than power, performance, and driving skill. And it is reflected in jokes such as those quoted above, which were taken not from late nineteenth-century cartoons and comics, but from books and online blogs produced in the twenty-first century.

Mona Domosh and Joni Seager write, “The car has been an especially powerful vehicle of women’s liberation, both literally and metaphorically. And yet, because of that, women’s relationships to cars have been contested and controversial” (123). One of the ways in which that

69 “Confidence Mediates the Sex Difference in Mental Rotation Performance” in Archives of Sexual Behavior (2012) 41: 557-570.
contestation has been expressed is through the circulation and maintenance of the woman driver stereotype. The original stereotype, which portrays the female motorist as nervous, inept, and absent minded, rose to popularity after the First World War with the intention to dissuade women from getting behind the wheel. The current stereotype, which links the woman driver to domesticity, came into prominence after World War II as a means to qualify women’s automobility. Although women have participated in American car culture for over a century, Domosh and Seager argue, the stereotypes about women and cars remain potent, shaping popular culture representations and auto industry decisions. As Domosh and Seager note, “in the US, which arguably has the most deeply entrenched social commitment to the car, jokes about ‘women drivers’ still resonate; automobile makers and dealers still treat women as secondary car consumers; women are still outsiders at garages, auto shows, racetracks, and car dealerships – all consummate ‘men’s spaces’” (125). The longstanding and ongoing association of the automobile with masculinity, coupled with the refusal to concede women’s equality as car owners and drivers, has sustained a cultural climate in which the woman driver stereotype is not only maintained, but continuously cultivated. As Peter Freund and George Martin remark, “This stereotype lives despite its lack of empirical support” (52).

Over the past century, numerous studies have been conducted to disrupt or dispel common perceptions of the woman driver. In 1925, the LA Times published an announcement by the American Automobile Association that “tests had proved conclusively that women drivers were just as competent as men and even less variable” (Brilliant 40). Thirty years later, the AAA produced a new study with similar results. As Jeremy Packer notes, “this study not only disproved the claims about how inadequate women were as drivers but went one step further in asserting their dominance over men in this most masculine of enterprises” (47). These and other
insurance studies were accompanied by reports from auto safety experts with the claim that “women in general are more law abiding than men and have better attitudes toward traffic ordinances” (Packer 55). Accident statistics have been a common means to cite women’s superior driving habits. According to estimates by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, men die at substantially higher rates per mile than women behind the wheel. As Tom Vanderbilt asserts, “Men may or may not be better drivers than women, but they seem to die more often trying to prove that they are” (255). These various reports rely on driving statistics to establish women as equal or better drivers than their male counterparts in order to problematize the woman driver stereotype. However, the conclusions drawn are based on quantitative data rather than the driving experiences of actual women. They do not take into account the underlying strategies responsible for the maintenance of negative generalizations, nor do they consider how particular groups of women, through driving performances and the meanings ascribed to cars in a variety of contexts, actively work to rebuke and replace ubiquitous woman driver stereotypes with constructions of their own making.

This project was undertaken to interrogate popular stereotypes that cast the female motorist, in the words of Scharff, as “something less than a driver” (“Wheel” 33). Citing the research of prominent automotive and gender scholars – including Scharff, Michael Berger, Julie Wosk, Georgine Clarsen, and Margaret Walsh – it provides insight into the origins of various stereotypes, the methods used to implement them, as well as the reasons for their continued influence in American car culture. And through the voices of over 100 women in three unique automotive categories – chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks – it offers new and empowering ways to consider the woman behind the wheel.
Women Drivers and the “Woman Driver”

The participants in this project ranged from 20-year-old women relatively new to cars to aging baby boomers in their 60s and beyond who came of age during the 1950s and 1960s, often considered the golden age of American automobile culture. Although most of the older participants were aware of the cultural stereotypes surrounding the woman driver, many of the younger motorists were not. Yet while not all participants were familiar with the particulars of each stereotype, the majority acknowledged that women’s driving is a subject of criticism in American car culture. As might be expected, they had varying opinions on the woman driver.

Many of the women who participated in this project professed that “woman driver” is not an actual category, but rather a derogatory term used to point to an individual’s lack of driving ability. As a 37-year-old Ford Ranger owner remarked, “It’s only ever used as a pejorative. As a way to say this person is a bad driver.” The 43-year-owner of a 1998 Pontiac Trans Am exclaimed, “It’s like a bad thing, you know. You see someone doing something wrong; oh it’s just a woman driver.” Others viewed “woman driver” as an attempt to set up women’s automotive skills in opposition to, and therefore less than, those of men. As a 43-year-old Ford F-150 owner stated, “It’s usually a man saying it; it’s always a man saying it, and they think we’re terrible drivers when they’re the ones that get in all the accidents.” The 31-year-old owner of a 1991 Pontiac Firebird added, “it helps men maintain their sense of empowerment. It’s mostly sexist guys, I’ve found, who say that.”

A number of participants viewed use of the term as a means to disparage women not only as drivers, but also as a gender. A 53-year-old accountant replied, “Someone is assuming that a poor driver must be female. Gender identification is biological and there is something biologically that makes me a poor driver.” Stated a 31-year-old Miata owner, “People really want
to group by sex, as this is a significant characteristic in our society, even when sex isn’t a driving factor. Many males are as poor at driving as women, and more men are poor drivers than exceptional drivers, but ‘man driver’ isn’t seen as a negative.” This automotive division, between men and women, superior and inferior, was both recognized and disputed by the contributors to this project. As a 47-year-old MINI owner asserted, “when it comes to the sexes I’m really against taking an entire sex into sort of a stereotype. Cause there’s many bad women drivers but just as many men.”

Some of the participants recognized the place of the woman driver stereotype in automotive history, as well as the agendas of those determined to perpetuate it. As the 65-year-old owner of a Miata noted, “All stereotypes have an ‘element of truth’ in them; that’s how they get started and prolonged. Initially they help make sense of new information to determine danger, but are soon warped to serve the needs of one group at the expense of another, and at the loss of making individual distinctions (because that would take too much time, cost too much money, or more accurately, force us to respect differences).” However, while some participants dismissed the existence of the “woman driver” altogether, others conceded there are female motorists who, as the 58-year-old owner of a 1970 Dodge Challenger proclaimed, “give the rest of us women a bad name!” Women who drive below the speed limit; who text or use cell phones while driving; who attend to their hair and makeup at stoplights; who know nothing about the car other than where to put the gas; or who are distracted by small children in the backseat were repeatedly mentioned as stereotypical woman drivers. Yet, no matter how the participants regarded the woman driver stereotype, they strongly and adamantly distanced themselves from it. Echoing the majority of participants, a 42-year-old MINI owner declared, “That’s not me.”

While distancing oneself from pejorative stereotypes can give the appearance of reinforcing
expectations regarding the typical woman driver, the majority of women who participated in this project sought to replace existing representations with new gender scripts based on their own experience with cars.

This project focuses on three unique automotive cultures, defined not only by vehicle make, model, and year, but also by the gender, age, race, class, location, sexual orientation, and ideology of the individuals within them. Going into this project, I assumed the female members of each driving population would have little in common with those from another. I believed they would have distinct and disparate methods in the construction of alternative woman driver identities. However, I discovered that, despite their considerable differences, the women who participated in this project shared a common objective as well as similar strategies to achieve it. Whether claiming ownership of a chick car, classic muscle car, or pickup, they endeavored to position themselves as atypical women behind the wheel. This was accomplished in two distinct ways. The first was through altering the cultural scripts historically associated with the woman driver through alternative gender performances. These gender performances were not only those associated with the act of driving, but also with how the women related to all things automotive. The second – which often influenced the first - was through the assignment of new meanings to the automobile, a process defined by Phillip Vannini as “objectification.” Each of these strategies not only allowed the women in this project to distance themselves from cultural stereotypes, but also to replace such stereotypes with new constructions of the woman driver. While the elements of the strategies particular to an automotive category were discussed in earlier chapters, returning to them here, to underscore how they were embraced and utilized by three diverse driving populations, provides evidence of their effectiveness, universality, and application to additional and alternative woman driver categories.
The Woman Driver as an Alternative Gender Performance

Gender performativity, Judith Butler argues, “presupposes that norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all” (“Precarity” xi). When a woman acts, she is doing so in a context where cultural norms exert significant pressure to perform in a gender appropriate manner. The woman driver is no exception. She is expected to act in a predetermined fashion, i.e. to choose and use a vehicle in a way that promotes and confirms her gender identity.

Addressing the performative nature of gender in automotive culture, Sarah Redshaw notes, “It is not simply that gender is a pre-existing category that we ‘express’ through certain styles; rather, it is something we actively produce through our practices around cars” (“Mobility” 22). The production and promotion of the woman driver stereotype was centered on this knowledge; the association of the female motorist with particular traits – cautiousness, passivity, heightened concern for safety, and lack of mechanical knowledge and ability - became a way to reinforce gender roles as well as to effectively shape women’s automobility. As Steve Craig argues, “Entire industries (automotive, cosmetics, fashion) are predicated on the assumption that men and women will continue behaving according to their stereotypes” (197). The women who participated in this project are aware of the assembled gender traits that have traditionally defined the woman driver. They understand that in order to distance themselves from the prevailing stereotypes, it is necessary to renounce these traits and replace them with those of their own making.

The original woman driver stereotype depicted the female motorist as incompetent, accident prone, distracted, and overly cautious. The women in this project challenged these presupposed gender performances through the construction of themselves as skilled and capable behind the wheel. As many of the women noted, “woman driver” is often considered
synonymous with “poor driver.” Consequently, the participants – whether owners of a New Beetle, classic Mustang, or Chevy Silverado - were quick to point out their own automotive acumen and superior driving skills. Whether conquering “twisties” on a road rally, testing reflexes on a racetrack or street corner, or maneuvering a two-and-a-half ton assemblage of sheet metal through traffic, the women cited these alternative gender performances as demonstrable proof that they had little in common with stereotypical woman driver representations. As a 43-year-old MINI owner exclaimed, “if it’s ever said about me I get very offended. I can drive better, faster, and safer than most men!”

The early woman driver stereotype also portrayed women as technologically incompetent and uninformed. As Clarsen writes, “time and again, male judgment, often in the form of ‘anti-woman driver’ humor, confidently announced that the most that could be expected from women was a timid and uninformed response to machinery, rather than a mastery of it” (“Dust” 2). Thus the project participants also refuted the woman driver label by presenting themselves as especially knowledgeable about cars. They recognized that, due to the automobile’s association with masculinity, the majority of American women are deterred from obtaining an automotive education. As a 27-year-old Ford F-150 FX4 Supercrew owner remarked, “I don’t know a lot of women who actually enjoy driving. I don’t think women get taught to drive like men.” And as a 29-year-old New Beetle owner noted, “I’ve seen women drivers at repair and tire shops, on more than one occasion, who have no clue what’s going on with their car. I am motivated to not fit that stereotype.” Almost all of the women who participated in this project have made conscious efforts to become car savvy, not only to become better equipped to deal with auto salespersons and repair personnel, but also to construct themselves as other than stereotypical women drivers. By performing these reconfigured gender scripts in automotive salesrooms and dealerships, at
car events, off the beaten track and on the road, they offer new constructions of the woman behind the wheel.

The second and prevailing stereotype links women’s driving to motherhood. While over half (58 out of 110) of the project participants indicated they have children, they frequently alter their expected gender performances by choosing vehicles and engaging in driving behavior that does not mark them as moms. The automobile industry has purposefully and profitably developed and promoted a vast automotive category directed toward women with children. As Cindy Donatelli writes, “the success in creating this market segment could be attributed more specifically in getting women to identify with any car so strongly by making its body a grid against which a mix of domestic, reproductive, and servile imperatives were staged” (91). The female participants understand the value of the minivan, crossover, and small SUV as family vehicles, and certainly acknowledge and take great pride in their past and present motherhood roles. However when on the road, they often desire to leave that identity behind. A retired 65-year-old chose a Miata so as to “not feel like a bus driving soccer mom.” A 35-year-old horse trainer and transporter drives a Ford F-350 King Ranch not only as means to perform her job, but also to avoid the appearance of a “mother clubber.” The woman driver stereotype is strongly associated with - and therefore effectively links - motherhood and poor driving. In fact the female participants often reinforced this connection by naming mothers with small children as both distracted and overly cautious, presenting a danger on the road. It is not surprising, therefore, that the women who participated in the project believe that in order to be taken seriously as legitimate drivers, it is necessary to select automobiles and engage in driving practices that do not invoke motherhood.

While a few of the women in this project call upon their chick cars, classic muscle cars,
and pickup trucks as family transport, the majority intentionally drive vehicles ill suited for this function. The chick car is too small to carry more than two individuals comfortably; the classic muscle car does not have the safety features found in contemporary family vehicles; and although the pickup is offered in an extended cab version, the high station of the full size pickup makes it difficult for small bodies to step into. By driving vehicles considered inappropriate for the conveyance of children, the women engage in a bit of gender trouble as they challenge the expectations surrounding women’s automobile choice and use.

The association between the woman driver and motherhood assumes that a vehicle under a woman’s direction will be used primarily for domestic responsibilities. Thus the project participants separated themselves from the stereotypical woman driver by engaging in uncommon activities with their cars. For the women with chick cars, these events included road rallies, road trips, driving tours, high performance driving events, autocrosses, test drives, driver improvement courses, and track days at local speedways. Women with classic muscle cars were often found at car shows, cruises, swap meets, and community parades. While some pickup-driving women hauled horse trailers, farm equipment, and boats, others relied on their vehicles for off-roading, mudding, and transporting recreational equipment. Rather than limit a vehicle’s use to the transportation of groceries and children, the women in this project called upon the MINI, classic Dodge Challenger, and Ford F-150 as a means to work, fun, adventure, recreation, excitement, and unique driving experiences.

The women who participated in this project altered their gender performances as car owners, users, and drivers as a means to distance themselves from popular and condescending stereotypes as well as to transform existing gender norms associated with the woman behind the wheel. They accomplished this by presenting themselves as skilled and knowledgeable drivers,
and by disassociating motherhood with their own automotive choices and driving experiences. In doing so, they revealed the artificiality of essential gender categories – particularly as applied to the automobile - and offered new constructions of the woman driver.

The Woman Driver as a Producer of New Meanings

The gendering of the automobile by automakers and marketers over the past century has been effective not only as a means to separate men’s and women’s car choice, use, and driving behavior, but also in its ability to confer gendered meanings onto cars. It is expected that the woman driver will think of the automobile in a particular way, based on what the manufacturer, and cultural scripts, demand. As Kathleen Franz writes, “corporations, designers, engineers, and consumers all aided in the social construction of the automobile, determining its design and its cultural importance as a machine, consumer product, and form of mobility” (“Automobiles” 53). However, as technology scholars – including Vannini, Franz, Redshaw, and Ronald Kline - have noted, users of technology often transform mechanical objects into something other than what the manufacturer intended. The women in this project – whether behind the wheel of a Miata, classic Dodge Charger, or Ford F-150 – discarded the gendered corporate and cultural meanings ascribed to the chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck and ascribed new meanings that reflect their own lives and driving experiences. As indicated in previous chapters, the meanings ascribed to the automobile are as varied as the cars and the women who drive them. However among the myriad relationships between women and their vehicles, there were three categories of meaning of particular significance shared by the majority of chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup driving women.

To the women in this project, the automobile serves as an important source of identity formation. Since the Second World War, the “family” vehicle has identified the woman driver as
a practical, reliable, economical, and safety conscious mom. While the majority of the female participants have assumed this identity on occasion, they rely upon their current vehicles of choice to display alternative subjectivities. As Peter Marsh and Peter Collett write, “we give [cars] personalities which reflect the nature of our relationships with them” (13). Russell Belk adds, “we also personalize our vehicles in various ways in order to bond more fully with them and make them a more direct expression of who we are” (273). Many of the women humanized their vehicles through naming (e.g. “Marilyn,” “Donovan,” “Baby,” “White Pepper,” “MINI Pearl”); others were quick to point out personality traits shared with the cars they drive. When linking themselves to their automobiles, chick car drivers used terms such as sporty, sassy, sexy, stylish, free spirited, cute, quirky, happy-go-lucky, and fun. To aging baby boomers, ownership of a classic muscle car announces them as bold, accomplished, powerful, capable, and badass. Women with pickups view themselves and their vehicles as rugged, hardworking, strong, tough, blue collar, and independent. Yet whether they drive a Miata, classic Camaro, or Dodge Ram, the women who participated in this project rely on the subjectivities they assume when behind the wheel to challenge the woman driver stereotype. When taking the wheel of a chick car, classic muscle car, or pickup, they are not the flighty, irresponsible, incompetent, or overly cautious drivers of sexist jokes and cartoons, nor are they the practical, reliable, dependable, and selfless moms who populate automotive advertising and popular culture. Rather, by taking on the characteristics of the cars they drive, they establish themselves as atypical woman drivers.

Addressing women’s automotive interest at the dawn of the motor age, Ashleigh Brilliant writes, “the driving of automobiles was one of the ways women could assert their new claim to equality” (40). To the women who participated in this project, it is not just the act of driving that symbolizes equality, but also mastery of a particular vehicle. The chick car, classic muscle car,
and pickup truck are modes of transportation historically associated with masculinity and the male driver. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the female participants viewed ownership of a Miata, classic Camaro, or Silverado, and participation in the respective automotive cultures, as evidence of a particular construction of gender equality. To owners of chick cars, taking part in tests of automotive acumen – road rallies, do-it-yourself events, and race days - serves as a demonstration of women’s parity with male drivers. As a 50-year-old Miata owner remarked, “there’s a ‘machoness’ that men feel when they can drive a sports car. And I think to see a woman on equal footing is empowering.” Women with classic muscle cars cite the important roles they assume within classic muscle car culture as indicative of gender equality in this historically masculine pastime. While her husband performs most of the maintenance on her classic 1969 Mustang, as a 50-year-old homemaker notes, “I’m the cleaner. I’m the one that usually does a lot of the detailing and makes sure it’s clean for the car shows.” And through the use of pickups for hauling, towing, and off-roading, female Chevy Silverado and Ford F-150 owners consider themselves as tough and hardworking as men with trucks. Of her 1985 El Camino, a 55-year-old auto repair technician exclaims, “Well men obviously love it. Because, once they see what I can do, I can do the things that many people think women can’t or supposed to do just in being a girl and then when they find out I can fix a truck on top of that it’s sort of like icing on the cake.” Although the male driver was often the standard by which the women in this project measured themselves, they did not consider their own driving as masculine, nor did they view their actions as attempts to usurp the man behind the wheel. Rather, they considered mastery of a chick car, classic muscle car, or pickup as proof of gender equality within American car culture. As they espouse the woman driver as equal to rather less than the male driver, the
women in this project promote gendered driving that differs and distances itself from commonplace stereotypes. In doing so, they offer new constructions of the woman driver.

During the 1920s, Scharff writes, “auto manufacturers depicted their product as the solution to the problem of women’s social isolation” (“Sphere” 138). Rural women were especially appreciative of the automobile as it provided them with the means to bridge the distance between homestead and community. In the decades following the Second World War, automobility promised the suburban housewife temporary freedom from the isolation of a homebound life. Although over the past 100 years there have been repeated attempts to limit women’s car use, women have continued to rely on the automobile as a gateway to social networks. To the women who participated in this project, participation in the social and automotive networks associated with a particular category of vehicle was an important component to ownership of a chick car, classic muscle car, or pickup. Chick cars owners socialize with other drivers not only to form friendships based on a common interest, but also to gain automotive knowledge and driving skills. Owners of classic muscle cars seek out others to share information and advice, and to engage in an activity focused on cars, family, and community. “Horse camping” centered around the pickup provides a way for female truck owners to socialize with other women active in equestrian events. The meanings ascribed to vehicles in these contexts is not centered on the chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck as a mode of transport, but as a means to make important social connections, share auto themed activities with other car enthusiasts, gain car specific knowledge, and to focus on friendship, family, and community.

Vannini writes, “technology (as a form of social organization) is a key player in society and culture” (3). There can be little doubt of the automobile’s influence on women’s lives since
its introduction a century ago. However, traditional (i.e. male centered) automotive histories have glossed over women’s relationship to the car; when presented, such accounts rarely veer from the dominant gender constructs associated with women’s automobility. The voices of the 110 women who participated in this project refute the limited ways we have been conditioned to think about women and cars. As the female chick car, classic muscle car, and pickup truck owners make evident, not only do women rely on their vehicles as sources of identity, gender equality, and social networks, but they also call upon them to create a myriad of meanings that have especial importance to their lives. In doing so, they refute existing stereotypes and offer unlimited possibilities for new constructions of the woman driver.

The Woman Driver as Subject rather than Stereotype

The ubiquity of representations that portray the woman driver in a particular gendered way discourages, if not prohibits, a consideration of alternative relationships between women and the automobile. The dominant construction of the woman driver in American culture reinforces traditional gender scripts regarding women’s automotive preferences and use, constrains women’s involvement with cars, and maintains the association of superior driving skill and automotive expertise with the male driver. This project disrupts the dominant construction of the woman driver through the examination of women’s active participation in three alternative automotive locations. It argues that while women may, in fact, perform gender behind the wheel of an automobile, they often do so in ways that expand, enhance, and empower the woman driver category.

Investigating the woman driver outside of dominant cultural constructions contributes to automotive and feminist scholarship in a number of ways. First, it brings long overdue attention to women’s relationship to the automobile. Due to the automobile’s longstanding association
with masculinity, automotive scholars have most often considered the automobile in American culture through the perspective of male automakers, marketers, and drivers. In these traditional accounts, women are considered through the lens of patriarchy: as objects to be seduced by male drivers, or as consumers of cars and household goods. Women’s relationship to the automobile is cited not to reflect on the car’s importance to women, but rather, as a means to reinforce cultural gender stereotypes and claim male - automotive and otherwise - authority. This project shifts the focus to consider women as independent actors in American car culture. It regards the woman driver as actively engaged in meaning making through consideration of what a particular car is and how it might be used. It investigates the process by which women reinvent themselves through rejection of hegemonic woman driver constructions. It examines three locations in which women call upon the automobile as a source of autonomy and identity formation as well as a means to negotiate historically masculine spaces.

Secondly, as it acknowledges the validity of the woman-car relationship, this project encourages women to become more auto-centric. While women’s relationship with the automobile has been traditionally expressed as little more than resigned dependency, exposure to new car experiences, coupled with the acquisition of automotive knowledge, has the potential to alter the role of the automobile in women’s lives and offer new possibilities for the woman driver. As Dani Ben-Ari and Susan Frissell suggest, a cultivated interest in automobiles at an early age, particularly through involvement in motorsports, has the ability to build self esteem in young women. In “Women Auto Know,” an article recently published in Feminist Media Studies, I argue that the automotive knowledge and negotiation skills gleaned from women’s car advice websites empowers women to become more effective car consumers and more skilled drivers. The accumulation of automotive knowledge, inspired by an interest and attachment to
the automobile, is likely to result in a self-assured individual who takes pleasure in the driving experience and who is better equipped to hold her own in auto dealerships and service establishments, traditional bastions of hyper-masculinity.

In addition, attention to women whose interest in the automobile exceeds its function as reliable transportation suggests there are employment and recreational opportunities for women with a passion for cars. As the interviews garnered for “Women with Muscle” suggest, women’s involvement with cars is often effectively channeled into auto related areas such as racing, automotive sales and repair, and automotive journalism, as well as auto industry careers in engineering, design, marketing, and development. The connection between automotive interest and career was most recently demonstrated in the promotion of Mary Barra – a self confessed “car gal” to chairperson of General Motors, becoming the first woman in automotive history to head a major car manufacturer. As Barra has quickly demonstrated, women’s influence in the auto industry has the potential to shift priorities and to influence how things are done.  

Women’s auto industry participation provides the opportunity for fresh and innovative perspectives to the car manufacturing practice. As Dale Spender infers, when women become part of the automotive development process, female drivers are no longer “restricted to working with a product that men designed to fit men’s lifestyles and hobbies” (169).

Thirdly, this project suggests new avenues of research to further explore the meanings women ascribe to automobiles. In 1983 Charles Sanford challenged scholars to remedy the lack of literature addressing the relationship between women and the automobile. As Sanford wrote, “what is needed is both an intimate feminine viewpoint from several perspectives about women’s

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70 Chris Woodyard, in USA Today, notes that Barra is able to “project a sense of change in what has been known as a hidebound organization.” Responding to the repercussions surrounding a design flaw before Congress, Barra vowed to change the corporate General Motors culture “from one where the primary focus was cutting costs to one where the primary focus is the customer” (Lebeau and Pohlman).
experience with cars and fairly objective, even statistical, studies of the same experience” (140).

While there has been a determined effort by historians and literary scholars to incorporate the woman driver into scholarship, the majority of existing research draws its analysis primarily from secondary sources, i.e. literature, film, newspapers, advertising, and various printed material. This ethnographic project provides an important new dimension to the current automotive literature through the inclusion of real women’s experiences. It not only underscores the importance of the automobile to women’s lives, but also provides a voice for a population of drivers that has been historically silenced. It suggests we expand the consideration of the woman driver as primarily caretaker and consumer to include those who rely upon the automobile for reasons that have little to do with domesticity and practicality. It argues that passion for and appreciation of the automobile is not limited to the male experience. It asserts that while the multiple meanings women ascribe to the automobile may differ from those of the male driving subject, each of those meanings – whether voiced as caretaker, consumer, or passionate driver - is equally valuable and therefore worthy of recognition. As it focuses on women’s car ownership and driving experience within three specific contexts and populations of women, this research not only troubles common perceptions of the woman driver, but also suggests the possibility of relationships between women and cars in other locations and thus encourages new areas of investigation.

In her research on girl racers, Karen Lumsden notes, “despite the proliferation of studies focusing on car cultures, the role of women within these subcultures remains largely undocumented” (“Deviance” 143). Due to the dearth of research on the woman driver and women’s driving cultures, the potential for future projects is limitless. Possibilities include women who are active in various racing cultures; women who participate in all-female car
organizations such as Throttle Gals, Lady Luck Car Club, and Heels Love Wheels; women who work in auto related fields such as auto mechanics, auto journalism, or car advice; professional female truck drivers; professional female bus drivers; and women who own hybrids, electrics, luxury sedans, modern day muscle cars, high-end performance cars, and other non minivan-crossover-SUV - aka “mom” - vehicles. This short listing of alternative car cultures populated by women not only reveals the multiplicity of women drivers, but also suggests how women relate to, derive meaning from, and perform gender in vehicles in countless different ways. This project has the potential to encourage others – in scholarship, auto journalism, and within the auto industry - to explore the diverse experiences of women drivers in whatever location they happen to find them.

Lastly, this project contributes to existing scholarship through the production of new knowledge about women and cars. It augments the work of feminist historians - including Scharff, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, and Walsh - who have interrogated the cultural construction of the “woman’s car” as a form of domestic technology. It continues the scholarly conversation – instigated by Franz, Clarsen, Judy Wajcman, and Wosk - regarding women’s reconfiguration of masculine machines and active engagement with male technologies. It draws attention to the gendering of automobiles and the automotive experience – as argued by Scharff, Cotten Seiler, and Deborah Clarke - and reveals women’s determined efforts to appropriate a masculine technology in order to create a legitimate space for themselves in American car culture. It moves away from representation and historical analysis to consider how real women in contemporary America consider the automobile and their relationship to it. It uncovers evidence of women’s relationship to the automobile in new and unusual places and behind the wheels of very different vehicles. It calls upon three alternative constructions of the woman driver to suggest the multiple
meanings women ascribe to cars and the driving experience. It disrupts, challenges, reconfigures, and reimagines the dominant construction of the woman driver through the narratives of real women. It calls upon my own previous work with alternative car cultures - chick cars, classic muscle cars, and the Lambda International Car Club - to suggest the limitless possibilities of the woman driver. It asks us to reconsider how women perform gender when behind the wheel of an automobile. And perhaps most importantly, it recognizes and promotes women as “authentic” drivers and legitimate actors in American car culture.

Reimagining the Woman Driver

I grew up in the Motor City without a car because my mother believed in the verity of the woman driver stereotype. She thought of herself as too nervous, distracted, uncoordinated, mechanically inept, and lacking in confidence to competently take the wheel. I worked in automotive advertising during an era in which the woman driver was an afterthought rather than a legitimate consumer and driver. I assumed car ownership in an automobile culture that had no place for the woman who lacked domestic proclivities. Like my mother, I too was the victim of a stereotype; my lack of representation in auto marketing, the media, and popular culture implied I was somehow “less than a driver.” The absence of women in advertising, the media, and popular culture who do not fit the reigning woman driver constructions does a disservice to the millions of female motorists who have unique, exciting, and empowering relationships with the car.

The automobile has had a monumental impact on the American way of life since its introduction in the early twentieth century. Yet although women make up nearly half of car owners, what we know about the woman driver is based primarily on what automakers choose to tell us. Industry generated constructions of the woman driver fail to address women’s complex relationship to cars; they do not consider the automobile’s role in women’s reconstruction of self;
they do not reflect upon ability of cars to take women’s lives in new directions; they do not understand how ownership of a particular automobile has the potential to transform the woman driver in a myriad of ways. The automobile touches nearly every American woman in some manner. This project was undertaken to understand how and why.

This project examines three populations of female motorists to expose the fallacy of popular representations and to uncover alternative constructions of the woman driver. It considers how women who own chick cars, classic muscle cars, and pickup trucks challenge historical and societal directives in order to create a legitimate and empowering space for themselves in the hegemonic masculine climate of American car culture. This project not only reflects upon the unique strategies employed to counter negative representations, but also demonstrates how the woman behind the wheel has the ability to reconfigure, reclaim, and reimagine the woman driver category to make it her own.

This project does not attempt to establish women drivers as similar to men, nor does it argue that it is necessary for women to behave like men around cars in order to be considered equal in American automobile culture. It is not intended to disparage women who embrace the automobile for its practical function, or to slight those who rely on it for family transportation. Rather, the goal is to broaden the category of the woman driver; to bring attention to the limitations and repercussions of various stereotypes; to consider the woman driver in all her complexities; and to argue that who the woman driver is and what she can be is not determined by auto manufacturers, marketers, or the media, but is in the capable and creative hands of the woman behind the wheel.

Ladies, start your engines.
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Figure 7. Author’s First Car – 1970 VW Beetle
APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

DATE: February 3, 2014
TO: Chris Lezotte
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [420687-5] Have You Heard the One About the ‘Woman Driver’? Chicks, Muscle, Pickups, and the Reimagining of the Woman Behind the Wheel
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: February 8, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: February 9, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exempt review category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Modifications Approved:
Increase the number of participants to 125.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 125 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on February 9, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board’s records.
My name is Chris Lezotte and I am currently a doctoral candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University conducting research for my dissertation. The project focuses on women whose vehicle choices suggest they do not conform to prevailing assumptions regarding the “woman driver.” For this study, I am interviewing women who own and drive vehicles that fall into one of three nontraditional car categories: chick cars, classic muscle cars, and personal pickup trucks. My goal in this endeavor is not to disparage those who choose to drive vehicles traditionally associated with the woman driver, but to uncover the voices and automotive experiences of women who use and relate to automobiles in a variety of interesting ways. As you are someone who drives a [xxx], I am hoping that can contribute to this project by telling me your feelings about automobiles in general, your [xxx] in particular, and how (or not) you see yourself as a ‘woman driver.’

While participants in this project will not receive a monetary award, they will help to dispel old stereotypes while bringing attention to important and exciting new categories of the “woman driver.” Those who agree to participate will be asked to sign and return this consent form in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope. Participants will be asked to indicate whether they prefer to be interviewed in person, by phone, or through email. Those who participate in person or by phone may have their responses recorded. For those who prefer either an in person or phone interview, a time that is convenient for both parties will be arranged. The interview questions will focus on the individual’s car history, ownership, and experience as well as participation in car organizations. I may request a few follow-up questions for clarification at a later date. The time required for the interview – while dependent on the length of individual responses – should be about 30 minutes.

I may also request a photo of your car for inclusion in the research document. To lessen the possibility of recognition, I will obscure license plate numbers and/or other identifiers with imaging software. To protect your privacy, I will not use car photographs that contain your image.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University, your job, or your affiliation with any car organization.

The data collected will be stored on my personal computer in password-protected files and hard copies will be kept in a locked file to maintain confidentiality. No one other than myself will have access to the data. Your identity will remain confidential, and I will never identify you by name in my work. In order to maintain this confidentiality, I will use a pseudonym or refer to you by age and car (i.e. ‘a 54-year-old owner of a blue Mini Cooper.’) (MORE)
I do not perceive any potential risks to you as a participant in this study. The risk of participation is no greater than that experienced in daily life.

This project has been approved by the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in it, you are welcome to contact me via email at clezott@bgsu.edu or by phone at 734 516-5166.

My advisor, Dr. Susana Peña, can be reached at susanap@bgsu.edu or 419 372-7117. You may also contact the Human Rights Subjects Review Board Chair at 419 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you very much for your time, and for participation in this project. Through this study, I hope to bring more attention and recognition to individuals who enrich and expand the woman driver category while having a whole lot of fun with cars.

_I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research._

Participant Name/Signature_________________________________________________________

Date_______________ Check for Consent □

Please indicate interview preference:

In person_____ Telephone_____ Email_____ 

Contact email address or phone number____________________________________________
CONSENT FORM – On Site

My name is Chris Lezotte and I am currently a doctoral candidate in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University conducting research for my dissertation. The project focuses on women whose vehicle choices suggest they do not conform to prevailing assumptions regarding the “woman driver.” For this study, I am interviewing women who own and drive vehicles that fall into one of three nontraditional car categories: chick cars, classic muscle cars, and personal pickup trucks. My goal in this endeavor is not to disparage those who choose to drive vehicles traditionally associated with the woman driver, but to uncover the voices and automotive experiences of women who use and relate to automobiles in a variety of interesting ways. As you are someone who drives a [xxx], I am hoping that can contribute to this project by telling me your feelings about automobiles in general, your [xxx] in particular, and how (or not) you see yourself as a ‘woman driver.’

While participants in this project will not receive a monetary award, they will help to dispel old stereotypes while bringing attention to important and exciting new categories of the “woman driver.” Those who agree to participate will be asked to sign and return this consent form in the enclosed stamped, self-addressed envelope. Participants will be asked to indicate whether they prefer to be interviewed in person, by phone, or through email. All in person and phone interviews will be recorded with the participant’s permission. For those who prefer either an in person or phone interview, a time that is convenient for both parties will be arranged. The interview questions will focus on the individual’s car history, ownership, and experience as well as participation in car organizations. I may request a few follow-up questions for clarification at a later date. The time required for the interview – while dependent on the length of individual responses – should be about 30 minutes.

I may also request a photo of your car for inclusion in the research document. To lessen the possibility of recognition, I will obscure license plate numbers and/or other identifiers with imaging software. To protect your privacy, I will not use car photographs that contain your image.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University, your job, or your affiliation with any car organization.

The data collected will be stored on my personal computer in password-protected files and hard copies will be kept in a locked file to maintain confidentiality. No one other than myself will have access to the data. Your identity will remain confidential, and I will never identify you by name in my work. In order to maintain this confidentiality, I will use a pseudonym or refer to you by age and car (i.e. ‘a 54-year-old owner of a blue Mini Cooper.’)
I do not perceive any potential risks to you as a participant in this study. The risk of participation is no greater than that experienced in daily life.

This project has been approved by the BGSU Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your participation in it, you are welcome to contact me via email at clezott@bgsu.edu or by phone at 734 516-5166.

My advisor, Dr. Susana Peña, can be reached at susanap@bgsu.edu or 419 372-7117. You may also contact the Human Subjects Review Board Chair at 419 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you very much for your time, and for participation in this project. Through this study, I hope to bring more attention and recognition to individuals who enrich and expand the woman driver category while having a whole lot of fun with cars.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Participant Signature____________________________________

Date__________

Please indicate interview preference:

In person____ Telephone____ Email____

Contact email address or phone number______________________________
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Information

Name: (Optional):
Email:
Car model(s) and year(s):
If you have more than one vehicle, which car is your daily driver?
Age:
Race/Ethnicity:
Sexual Orientation:
Relationship Status:
Children: ___Yes ___No
Place of residence:
Occupation:
Income (Indicate whether individual or household):
___Less than $25,000 ___$25,000 - $40,000 ___$40,000 - $100,000 ___Over $100,000
Would you describe yourself as: ___Conservative ___Moderate ___Liberal

General Car Information

Tell me about your car.
- How long have you had it?
- How would you describe it?
- What made you choose it?
What is special about this car? What does it mean to you?
What does your car say about you?
Tell me the history of this car. What is your history with this car?
Do you have any good stories about this car?
Where do you drive this car?
What qualities in a car are important to you? What are the qualities that made you choose this car?
Have you always had an interest in cars? Elaborate.
Do you do any work on this car?
Where or who do you go to for car repair or maintenance?
What else can you tell me about this car?

Vehicle Specific Information

Chick Car
What were the features that attracted you to this car?
How is it different than your previous vehicles?
Are you familiar with the term “chick car?” What does that label mean to you?
What do you believe are the qualities that make a car a “chick” car?
In what way does your car reflect you? How do you feel when you drive it?
What does your car mean to you? What place does it have in your life?
Do you think driving this car changes people’s perceptions of you? In what way?
Do you believe cars have a gender? If so, how would you describe your car?
Do you consider your current car to be a “transitional” car?
How does this car differ from past/other cars?
What do you suspect your next car will be?
What else would you like to tell me about your car?

*Classic Muscle Car*
What is your definition of a muscle car?
What is the significance of a muscle car?
Why did you choose a muscle car?
Have you owned a muscle car in the past? If so, tell me about that car.
Has anyone in your family owned a muscle car?
Were you interested in muscle cars when you were younger? Why or why not?
Did you participate in muscle car culture as a young adult? Tell me about that experience.
How do you feel when driving a muscle car?
Do you think that the muscle car has a gender? How does driving a muscle car affect/disrupt
gender expectations?
Do you think owning a muscle car changes people’s perceptions of you? In what way?

*Pickup Truck*
What led you to choose this vehicle?
How does it differ from previous or other current vehicles?
How do you use this vehicle (daily driver, work related, particular tasks, participation in events, etc.)
Have you always had an interest in trucks?
Why did you choose a truck over a more conventional vehicle?
How do you feel when driving this vehicle?
Do you think driving this vehicle changes other people’s perceptions of you? In what way?
Do you think that trucks have a gender? How does driving a truck affect/disrupt gender expectations? How do others (men and women) respond to you, as a woman, driving a truck?
Have you been ridiculed for your vehicle choice?
Do you do any work on this vehicle?
Have you done any modifications on this vehicle?
How does this vehicle reflect you?
Have you developed any friendships/relationships through truck ownership?
Do any of your friends own/drive trucks?
What are the positive/negatives about driving a truck?

*Woman Driver Stereotypes*
What do you think of when you hear the term “woman driver?”
Do you think the common stereotypes of the “woman driver” have any truth to them? Why or why not?
How would you define “woman driver”?
Do you view yourself as a “woman driver?” Why or why not? Elaborate. Does driving a [chick car, classic muscle car, pickup truck] alter how you, or those who meet you, define a “woman driver?”

*Car Club Membership & Activities*

Do you participate in any activities/events with this vehicle? Describe. What do you like about these events? Do you belong to any organizations affiliated with this vehicle? Describe. If not, what has prevented you from joining? What are the benefits of club membership? What does club membership mean to you? Have you developed any friendships in the club? Do feel that gender (being female) affects your membership in this club? In what way?

*Additional Information*

1. Please add any comments about your car, car club membership, or what your vehicle means to you.
2. May I contact you for further information?
3. Would you care to contribute photos of you and/or your car(s)? If so, please email them to me at clezott@bgsu.edu. I will digitally alter identifying characteristics (i.e. license plate numbers) to make the car less recognizable.
4. Your responses may be incorporated into the completed document. A pseudonym will be used to protect your privacy. Would you like me to change the description of your car in the text to make it less recognizable?
5. Do you have any female friends with a [chick car, classic muscle car, pickup truck] who might be interested in participating in this project? If so, please pass on my email address to them so that they can contact me about the details.

Thank you for your help in this project. I will be happy to send you a copy of the research project once it is completed.

Chris Lezotte
PhD Student
American Culture Studies
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio
clezott@bgsu.edu