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Rubber Tramp Goddesses: Navigating Intersections of Aging and Female Gender on the Fringes of America's Highways

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Abstract

The narrative of American nomadism is a story of contradictions. Retirees are seen pursuing a life of leisure in RVs, their rolling recliners moving from one scenic destination to the next. Young men, spending their summers beach-bumming in a Volkswagen van, engage in a culturally-indulged rite of passage. In the imagination lives the promise of adventure–life on the road ala Kerouac or Steinbeck. Historically, however, a strong cultural sentiment against transiency stigmatizes mobile lifestyles. Its members live on the fringes of traditional norms both spatially and socially. While #vandwelling is being popularized on social media as an appealing alternative lifestyle, cities across the country are simultaneously implementing bans on overnight street parking in an attempt to mitigate what is viewed as homelessness. Despite this stigma, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), an annual meetup of nomads in Quartzsite, Arizona, has been doubling in size since 2009. In 2018 there were over 3000 attendees, and the organizers–acknowledging that single women are a significant portion of those gathering–launched its first women-only event. A majority of those who attended the Women's RTR were single women over the age of fifty. "Going solo," these women are crossing more transgressive social lines than their male counterparts as they defy gendered social and familial expectations to claim space within what has traditionally been a male-dominated road narrative. What motivates these women–at a time when security, rootedness, and comfort are generally prioritized–to live out precarious existences in cars, vans and old motorhomes? Based on participant-observation and interviews, this paper focuses on the experiences of liberation, displacement and transgression as these women seek new lives and identities on the road. Their stories offer a reframing of what it means to age, as a woman, in America.

1. Introduction

According to the Oxford's Lexico[1], the nomad is "A member of a people that travels from place to place to find fresh pasture for its animals and has no permanent home." The nomads of the American Southwest–those who live in their cars, vans, trucks, refurbished school buses and recreational vehicles (RVs) year round–are not in search of open fields to feed their livestock, nor do they exist as a separate "people", moving in unison. They are strangers to each other, drawn from all parts of the country to the Arizona desert. With few exceptions, they consider themselves 'houseless, not homeless.' "Home", as a popular bumper sticker says, "is where I park it." However, they are nomads in the critical sense that they migrate year round from place to place, often motivated by economics (where to find work, where they can park free or cheaply, where they can access resources), and they do not claim a physical permanent location as "home."

1.1 Boundaries: The Nomad and a Contemporary Fringe Landscape

Discussions of nomadism may often focus on the more germane concepts of migration and mobility through unfettered space. Pastoral nomads inhabited what Deleuze and Guattari in *Nomadology: The War Machine*, referred to as "smooth space."[2] It is within an absence of divisions–lines marking private and public land, roadways, and permanent structures that are so ubiquitous to modern "striated"[3] topography–that the context of nomad life has been both historically and uniquely situated. This paper, conversely, focuses a lens on boundaries. The modern "rubber tramp,"–a designation pulled from the last century, dusted off and resurrected by a modern fringe community–does not migrate freely. These contemporary American nomads inhabit, instead, narrow asphalt arteries. Jessica Bruder, in her recent book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, describes them moving along highways like "blood cells through the veins of the country." [4] Moreover, roadways are liminal spaces, and their support services–such as gas stations and rest stops–are all developed to encourage continuous movement. They allow for only temporary respite, actively discouraging occupation. They serve people and objects in states of fluidity moving from one rooted space to another. By definition, then, these spaces deny "belonging." While roads and parking lots are "internal" to community structure, they reside "outside" of inhabited space. They mark the fringes.

Beyond these boundaries, there is also precious little else to occupy freely. Even traditional nomads need to stop during their migrations and set up camp. Humans need to sleep, stretch and exercise their bodies, work, pray, and socialize. However, America's cities, suburbs, and agricultural lands are all tightly-packed landscapes of private ownership: each sharing overlapping boundary lines. To step off the road, whether in the city or the countryside, is to trespass. For the modern nomad, respite from constant movement is difficult to come by. Overnight public parking is often banned by city ordinances, even in otherwise commercial and quasi-private parking lots normally friendly to RVers, such as Walmart.[5] National and state parks, and other lands set aside for public use, also impose limitations. Deleuze and Guattari would consider these areas "counted."[6] There are fees to camp, there are a limited number of campsites, and there are restrictions on the amount of time these spaces can be occupied–less they become "inhabited."[7] The Long Term Visitor Areas (LTVAs) in the western U.S. may be generously seasonal–allowing occupation for months at a time–but the alternative *free-from-fees* Bureau of Land Management (BLM) areas restrict camping to two weeks at a time. These lands are set aside not for living, then, but for temporary recreational usage.

These public lands, especially out West, are also uninhabitable without infrastructure. The summer heat–which climbs into the triple digits–requires a summer exodus. One nomad told me during my time in Coyote Howls, a private campground in Why, Arizona, that if someone "makes the mistake of staying past Mother's Day, they'll never again be right in the head." It is within these fringes and marginalized spaces, that rubber trampers live their lives. Daily, they confront myriads of boundaries that define what they can, and can't do, and where they can, and can't go. The physical, economic, and legal boundaries are most obvious, but humans have always created less tangible divisions as part of culture-making. They are often stronger than the visible ones. These include the lines of othering and stigma that marginalization erects. Anthropologists Counts and Counts, in their 1997 ethnography studying RVing seniors, *Over the Next Hill*, noted that these areas also marked those that camped in them as fringe-dwellers, "Boondockers[8] are also marginal because of the kinds of places they park. They camp on the desert, often in the shade of a creosote bush or small thorn tree, without any amenities, recreation facilities, or external protection from ruffians who might harass or rob them."[9]

These boundaries are also the parameters that define identity: how others perceive us, with what community or "tribe" we identify, and how we come to understand ourselves. Anthropologist John Wood, who spent extensive time with the Gabra nomads in East Africa, writes, "…people with different understandings of space may also have different understandings of identity."[10] For the Gabra, this entailed the development of ambivalence towards gender roles: a fluidity that mirrored their migratory lifestyle. Their identity was grounded in movement through smooth space. What, then, does a mobile existence mean for the modern rubber tramper who comes from, and moves through highly striated space? How is their identity influenced? When either gender takes to the road they deliberately initiate this new lifestyle by crossing over a line, moving away from the mainstream community and towards, and into a marginalized and "outside" state of being. They take their understanding of who they are and where they belong onto the road into an act of remaking that sense of self and belonging. For women, the parameters of ingrained gendered expectations create additional layers of nuanced boundaries. Sometimes the boundaries they are crossing have been erased, and older women find themselves liberated. Other times they are displaced and forced out. Many times, they transgress, and they escape, defying strong opposition.

1.2 Identity in the Context of Mobility

Deleuze and Guattari also argued that nomadism is inherently dangerous to the state: those power structures that have a vested interest in nation-making. Migratory communities can't be counted and taxes can be neither assessed nor collected. Nomads have no interest in land ownership, so they can't be controlled with territorial inducements. To choose to be a nomad, then, in that broad sense, is a rebellious act, and perhaps even a dangerous one. William Least Heat-Moon, who wrote *Blue Highways*, a book about his nomadic travels in America at the end of the last century, says of that first impulse to take to the road, "Beware thoughts that come in the night. They aren't turned properly; they come in askew, free of sense and restriction, deriving from the most remote of sources."[11]

While the U.S. government doesn't perceive the relatively small numbers that make up highway nomadism a threat, and global nomadism is emerging as an accepted trend of the digital age, mobile lifestyles remain tinged in the mystique of the outlier and social insurrectionist. In *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, T.J. Demos writes, "The nomadic—especially as originally theorized by Deleuze and Guattari—may nevertheless retain its radical potential when it comes to the critique of identity and belonging…"[12]

Heat-Moon believes a reasonable person–one in charge of their full faculties,–does not entertain the idea of becoming a nomad. The choice feels somehow wrong to him, even while simultaneously he cannot resist the call. Tossing and turning in his bed, he is questioning how to start this journey of "living out of the back end of a truck," when he is drawn his bedroom window by the honking of geese. Looking up the flocks flying overhead he finds his answer, to "…begin by following spring as they did–darkly, with neck stuck out."[13]

1.2.1 the stigma of transiency

Jessica Bruder identifies the contemporary nomads she lived with, those forced on the road to follow an emerging gig economy, as "…a new kind of wandering tribe." She says these are people, "who never imagined being nomads…They are driving away from the impossible choices that face what used to be the middle class."[14] There may be a new wave of migration–one that is sourced from the downward trajectory and erosion of a socio-economic middle class–but highway nomads have always existed. They also have always straddled the line between negative associations of trailer[15] parks and the more commercially romanticized lifestyle of recreational RVers.

The stigma of transiency has been pervasive at least since the English enacted vagrancy laws in the late fifteen-hundreds. European gypsies may be romanticized in fiction, but in reality, they are unwelcome when they camp on the back doors of settled communities. In America, those associated with mobile lifestyles fare no better. In her book *White Trash: America's Strange Breed*, historian Nancy Isenberg writes of the perception of trailer parks and critically, people that live in mobile homes. "As transitional spaces, unsettled spaces, they contain occupants who lack the civic markers of stability, productivity, economic value, and human worth." There is a strong cultural belief that home requires permanence, and subsequently, that permanence forms moral character. She goes on to say, "…today's trailer trash are merely yesterday's vagrants on wheels, an updated version of Okies in jalopies and Florida crackers in their carts…They are renamed often, but they do not disappear."[16] This association of mobility with poor moral character bleeds over into the segment of RVers that in 1997 anthropologists Counts & Counts identified as boondockers. In their ethnography, *Over the Next Hill*, they also noted a critical contradiction that is still pervasive.

> Today, RVers who reject the consumer ethic and attempt to live frugally are perceived as trying to get something for nothing, as being 'cheap,' a criticism leveled particularly at boondockers…[they] are regarded by others with considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, the way boondockers live epitomizes the values on which America was founded. They are independent of rules and regulations. They live simply, with a minimum of luxury and expense. They embody the qualities of individualism and ingenuity. And they cooperate on their own terms for mutual security and to share resources. On the other hand, they are marginal to North American society.[17]

This stigmatization is well understood by the women I interviewed. One of those was Silvianne, a 62-year-old former-HR-administrator-turned-tarot-reader, who was also featured in Bruder's book. She told me,

> *Of course, I had that first night that practically everybody I've ever talked about–that at least has slept in a van–maybe it's not the same in a bigger rig, in an RV that seems a little more legitimate–but that thing where you don't sleep all night. You know, you're convinced that the cops are going to come knock on your door and you're just laying there [thinking]…what is wrong with me? What choices did I…thank God my parents*

> *aren't alive to know I'm an old geezer parked in downtown Santa Fe sleeping in a van. So yeah, that fear of being caught you know or that I'm doing something wrong, you know?*

She also believed herself to be living a more moral existence. "Sometimes, even I wonder, 'is there something wrong with me?' But then I remember that I am living much closer to the way humans have lived through the ages than your average suburban or urban American. Mainstream society as we know it is falling apart, and that's a good thing."

1.2.2 rubber tramping: a marker of membership

The term "rubber tramp" was appropriated from its historical usage by a small group of vandwellers associated with The Cheap RV Living website when, in 2009, they initiated what would become the annual and growing nomadic gathering, known as the "Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR)." This was less an appropriation than a natural extension of how it was originally coined. Douglas Harper, discussing his experience with tramp culture of the mid-twenty-first century, writes,

> Note that I refer to these men as "tramps" because this is how they define themselves. The existence of a distinctive culture is often signaled by words that have meaning only within the framework of that culture. When tramps see another man in a freight car, they see a bindle-stiff, an Airedale, a mission-stiff, a rubber tramp, a jack-roller, or one of many other categories of tramps. Each of these labels defines a certain set of actions, possessions, behaviors, and beliefs. In other words, they are not casual definitions but definitions that indicate an individual's identity.[18]

Like Harper's tramp culture, the distinctions within the contemporary nomad community are often based around differences such as vehicle types that mark social class. Cars, vans, buses (known as 'skoolies'), and different types of RVs each offer a different style of traveling, camping, identity, and potentially, like-mindedness all based on function. As an example, those in vans and cars, if they choose, can operate in 'stealth' mode. Using blackout curtains, thin roof-mounted flexible solar panels, and no visible external signs of habitation, these vehicles can 'pass' in parking lots as unoccupied. In contrast, the rubber tramping nomads in the corner of Arizona, where I do my fieldwork, are not worried about being conspicuous. They sport sagging cargo carriers laden with the necessities of boondocking–generators, gas containers, rolled-up and dust-riddled outdoor mats, folding chairs, plastic storage totes, and trash containers. Stealth is not required.

The RTR event, as first imagined by that small group of original rubber trampers, has exploded in size. The 2018 gathering attracted over three-thousand attendees. It was covered by the NY Times, whose article billed it as the "'Real Burning Man." [19] The article described the RTR as counter-cultural and promoting an alternative lifestyle. The language echoed similar ones to Counts & Count's full-timers, who, two decades ago, saw "…themselves as heirs of the pioneers who crossed North America in covered wagons seeking freedom and a new life."[20]

1.2.3 "elsewhere": identity rooted in movement

Although, by definition, "home" for nomads is not a destination, because rubber trampers are first, and foremost, seeking a new way of living outside of, and beyond, their origins–I draw heavily on the idea of "elsewhere," as a state of being, put forth by anthropologist Brian Hoey in his ethnography on lifestyle migration, *Opting for Elsewhere*.

> Lifestyle migrants tell travel stories. As narratives of personal discovery, they embody movement through time and place. They describe feelings of losing a sense of control and the search to find it. As we have seen, this may involve passing through seemingly liminal states that lead to real or imagined reorientation to the good....lifestyle migrants believe that they can realize potential selves through the option of elsewhere.[21]

For the contemporary rubber trampers, then, "elsewhere" as "home" is not a geographical place. Hoey refers to the potential of place as identity-making, but for these nomads, it is found within the physical experience of continuous transition and adaptation. Bruder notes, "…there is hope on the road. It's a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It's just ahead..."[22]

The destination–and who the rubber tramp will find themselves to be when they arrive–is a constantly moving target. It is always "just ahead," and therefore, "elsewhere" exists for them as a state of perpetual movement. It is a state of

being: a relationship–wherein movement is an understood state of permanence, and inhabitable and fixed geography is the fickle partner. Identity-making is not found in relation to place, but within the values associated with the nomadic lifestyle.

1.2.4 the promise of a better self

The Cheap RV Living website's home page greets visitors with the pronouncement, "Welcome to the Best Times of Your Life." It paints the picture of an existence where you can save the money paid to the "landLORD," and instead become, alone "the LORD of your life!"[23] The term, "stick it to the man," one that emerged in the sixties as a rallying cry against authority, comes to mind. Under the website's menu tab, "Philosophy," are found pages entitled, "Embracing Minimalism" and "Finding True Freedom." The site acts as a manifesto for the rubber tramp ideology. It also teaches skills–offering advice on how to budget, where to find cheap camping, how to park undetected, and how to creatively scour for needed resources in otherwise unexpected places.

The credo of the movement's self-styled evangelist and owner of the Cheap RV Living website, Bob Wells, is "radical simplicity." He poses a question to the crowd. Why do so many introverts–assumed to be a necessary trait for successful rubber tramping–come to the RTR? He responds to his own question, "We're looking for like-minded people who will let us be our authentic selves." While most of the rubber trampers at the RTR appeared to be white, educated, and originating from middle-class backgrounds, there were marked differences. Sexual preferences varied and political beliefs leaned both far-right and far-left. Conspiracy theorists shared the campfire with left leaning social justice warriors. What ties them together was the sense they were rejecting the mainstream. In *The New Nomads: temporary spaces and a life on the move*, Robert Klanton theorizes that the trend of global nomadism "…is a commitment to opt out of the conventional 'in the box' way of doing things. The old social contract is no longer delivering on its promises, if it ever did: the American dream was just that."[24]

The nomad's authentic and better self, then, is one that rejects commercialism and acquisition. The better self lives closer to nature. It finds purpose in adaptation and meaning in creative recycling. It is brave, respectful of the land and the less fortunate, resourceful and independent. And at the end of the day, the better self seeks a way to be valuable–to be of use to the larger community.

1.3 Female Gender and Aging

1.3.1 women on the road

Watching video interviews with rubber trampers, while in the research phase of my project, I found it significant that no one thought that asking women if they were afraid, but not men, was in any way unusual. As women, despite our Americanized sense of gender equality, we know from the time we are knee-high that to be a female is to be prey. We know that public spaces, isolated spaces, and fringe spaces are inherently dangerous for women's bodies. It's an assumption so deep we don't question the rightness or wrongness of it.

Subsequently, "the road" as it is perceived in the imagination and popular fictitious literature, is a male narrative. One night as I sat around with the campfire with "the boys," I found myself transported back to a world not unlike one that might have been sketched out by Jack Kerouac for his still-popular beatnik novel, *On the Road*. A joint was passed around, followed by a bottle of tequila, which was then followed by a jar of vodka-soaked maraschino cherries. The teasing was good-natured and banter was light. Dave D. told the story of the night he'd taken off from a party on his motorcycle and didn't realize the pipe he had stuffed in his jacket pocket was still half-lit. Halfway home, feeling warmer than he expected, he happens to glance down to his side mirror and sees flames reflected. They are streaming out behind him from his jacket and pants. As he related how he stripped down, once he'd made it home, and peered down at the hole that had burned all the way down through his underwear–but left his "Johnson"–unscathed, our hoots and laughter would have scared away any coyotes within a mile. In Kerouac's fiction, the main character, Sal, offers detailed descriptions of his adventures and the male characters, but the women are flat and one-dimensional. They are either angelic or hateful, and the former exist, in this fiction, only to serve the character's romanticized needs. In a persuasive article, where she deconstructs the mythology of the American "road narrative" across various works of fiction including Kerouac's work, Alexandra Ganser notes how women's bodies are marked–and not allowed full personhood on the road.

> Women taking to the road are frequently deemed to be erratic misfits, which is reflected in expressions like "streetwalker," "wayward girl," "tramp" and "loose" or "public" woman, all of which connect female bodies,

> public space, and mobility, and (via the concomitant negative connotations) identify her as deviant, improper, and out of place.[25]

This conceptualization is being challenged, but still does remain part of the road culture. At the RTR warnings are circulated through women's conversations–there is a man who has set up his expensive fifth wheel claiming to be a single nomad, but in reality is married and just using the event as an excuse to "find sex." Although in Section 4 male attention is somewhat downplayed and seen mostly as charming, Lee–who has lived as a nomad for a number of years–is less than prosaic about her experience of being a female on the road, writing in an email,

> *The comment you made about women concerned about being victimized is so true. Men just don't get it…Even now, out on the road, I've had to stop being my friendly and natural, outgoing self around nomad men. They take my openness as an invitation to a usually sexual relationship. Men on the road generally have nothing but time, and I surmise that they follow the "shit on the wall" approach to getting laid ("throw enough shit on the wall and something will stick"). That is the second thing that I don't like-having to change who I am because of horny, aggressive men. I've left prepaid campsites to get away from men who think it's perfectly okay to tell me that they want to have sex with me. Blech! I'm sure you don't want to h*ear that, *but that has been my experience as a solo woman on the road.*

At the campfire that night, I was aware I was the only woman in the group–there was the sense that there was competition for my attention (this would be affirmed in later conversations.) I was once again the subject of the male gaze. Ganser and Lee remind me that taking to the road is a transgressive act for female bodies. Women are supposed to "stay in their place." In Sections 4-6 the reality of gendered limitations is explored. Ganser continues,

> American highways and backcountry roads, once conceived of as gendered spaces, are never pre-existing, easy riding, adventurous, liberating, or socially detached playgrounds that the legendary male quest-narratives [and] currents of male-centered road narratives seem to suggest. To the contrary: in women's cultural representations of the road, the complex web of gendered space is reflected as well as challenged…In most women's narratives of the road [they]… find themselves as "prisoner[s] of the white lines of the freeway," as Joni Mitchell put it in her legendary road-song "Coyote" of her 1976 album Hejira, and as such are not liberated by motion, but confronted with spatial limitations not much different from those encountered at the hearth.[26]

1.3.2 perceptions of aging

There is a socially-created line that demarcates "old" on one side, and "not old" on the other. On either side of that imagined boundary exist vastly different geographies. In a book that teaches meeting facilitators how to present visually memorable concepts, the author suggested one way to identify old people (with an otherwise anonymous stick-like figure) was to move their heads down onto their shoulders, eliminating any suggestion of uprightness. They are physically diminished.[27] In another book, titled *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*, a student is asked to free-associate shapes, with a circle being the origin point. She associates circle with "squares", and then off of that shape she writes, "old folks," "stuck/rut," and "going no place."[28] When someone says "chocolate never gets old," two assumptions are occurring. First that "old" as a concept, exists in situ, as a place things reach and become fixed in. Second, that wherever "old" is, it is a place for things and ideas that are no longer interesting. They are stale, expired and irrelevant. This is the current American (and, some might argue unique) understanding of what it means to reach a line in the process of aging where people are shoved over and then frozen within a space defined by negative associations.

This narrative is not just within the realm of socialization. It's also a story told within the scientific community. An article on the Psychology Today website draws a correlation between aging and the tendency towards conservatism.[29] While the author quoted scientific studies and was very careful to talk about tendencies and not absolutes, his conclusions extend factual data into the realm of what we believe is inevitable about aging. First, the author says, that as we age, our ability to be curious diminishes.

> …scientific studies shows that intellectual curiosity tends to decline in old age...Higher levels of Openness have been associated not only with aesthetic and cultural interests, but also with a general tendency to seek emotionally stimulating and adrenalizing activities (e.g., from scuba diving to bungee jumping; from drugs to unprotected sex). Furthermore, open people are also more likely to display counter-conformist attitudes,

> challenge the status quo and disrespect authority. Although these qualities make high Openness a potential threat to society, Openness is also the source of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as an intellectual antidote to totalitarianism, injustice and prejudice.[30]

The author continues to postulate that the aging brain, being old and tired, prefers to work on auto-pilot. It is too difficult to adapt and improvise so instead the aging person desires predictability and routine. The author concludes by saying that as we age we need closure. We need our lives to be structured and we reject any counter-cultural ideas. The implication is that, in general, aging processes are biologically inevitable and produce limiting and regressive behaviors.

These ingrained beliefs about what aging looks like ultimately lead to age discrimination and this prejudice hits women especially hard. In 2018, almost fifty-four million women in the United States were 50 years old and over.[31] Out of a population of just over 327 million, that is over 16%. If you add in the twenty more million women that are 35-50,[32] 35 years old being the age when many women are already feeling the effects of age discrimination in the workplace,[33] then 23%, or almost a quarter of our population is being dismissed as less valuable and less important to our society.

Aging, or rather the perception of it as described above, seemed at odds with the community of nomadic rubber trampers I would come to know. Instead, I found them to be independent, rebellious, creative, adventurous and adaptive. The following sections offer stories that are intended to reframe the narrative of women aging in America.

> *... the hey-day of woman's life is on the shady side of fifty, when the vital forces heretofore expended in other ways are garnered in the brain ...* ~ Elizabeth Cady Stanton[34]

2. Methods: Motivation, Project and Process

The video that sparked my journey featured a woman of indeterminate age–I guessed she was in her sixties–who was being interviewed about living full-time on the road. Behind her, a dusty van crouched like a turtle, impossibly loaded down with water tanks and plastic storage bins; the hitch-mounted cargo carrier caused the rear-end to sag. Her hair had no discernible style. It was cropped, frizzy, and tufts of rebellion marched around a receding hairline. She wore no makeup. Her lined face was a testament to years of either indulging in the sun or smoking. She was overweight in the way the Venus of Willendorf[35] is large and generous–her sagging breasts and prominent stomach were visual manifestations of her physicality. Her large arms flapped as she enthusiastically shared with the world her secrets of how to successfully toilet in a five-gallon bucket.[36]

For me, in a moment of awareness–of submerged recognition–she walked out of the screen and into my psyche as a living goddess. She was everything I deemed authentic–stripped of artifice and forthright–yet she was nothing like the woman I thought I was supposed to be (at least who *I needed to be* to retain value as I aged.) Common images in the American media told me I should be married and wealthy–golfing and enjoying the good life on a beach. Forbearing that, I should be baking cookies and making myself useful as a paragon of unconditional love to the younger generation. Any other identity, whether I chose to express myself outwardly sexual, or take in a houseful of cats, was fodder for jokes. I had crossed over the boundaries of youth, and my sexuality–the feminine coin of entree into the world of relevance had been spent. My only option it seemed, at least in terms of social meaning was to drag my tired "brother ass" out and find some socially acceptable way to be useful to others. Not to create for others, not to be a leader, but to volunteer my time and wisdom–unpaid–to a more relevant up and coming younger generation. It was a generation that I suspected, whether rightly or wrongly, wasn't listening.

Kodey, a 70-year-old I met after returning from my fieldwork, told me she was similarly motivated. After seeing a different video, she explained it this way. "Do you remember the commercial that they play at Christmas where the M&M's tiptoe down the stairs and surprise Santa Claus? In shock, they exclaim, 'you do exist!' That's exactly how I felt when I discovered this community of rubber trampers–people like me do exist!" Since then, she has been divesting herself of everything she owns and retrofitting a mid-90s van to live in. She's counting the days until she can join the tribe she currently follows online.

The women we were seeing were strong, upright, verbal–and public in a way I had, until then, believed was impossible. They personified Age, warts and all, yet they were also fully engaged in lives where they were the singular focus of their world. These women weren't bleeding out their essence to be of value. Of course, I wanted to know the woman I saw on that video. I wanted, like Kodey, to know the whole tribe of them.

2.1 Research: Finding Juno

Like other women, I first needed to determine what vehicle would meet my requirements. Many women, for example, choose a van. It can be stealthy in urban environments and because it's smaller it's not only easier to drive, but it offers better gas mileage than a traditional motorhome. Others travel in cars, often with tents. One woman who blogs, Suanne, [37] travels in a Prius. Other women choose a truck or a van and pull a small camper.

Some, like myself, choose more traditional RVs. These have the advantage of being self-contained; they have toilets, showers, sinks, furnaces, fans, air-conditioning, and all the comforts of home, except in miniature. Not all these features work when camping off the grid, but they offer versatility in that they can be plugged in at traditional campgrounds. Because I would have to travel with pets and valued my space, I ultimately choose a small twenty-one-foot Class C. This hybrid truck-motorhome allowed access from the camper to the cab. If I were to find myself in a situation where I felt threatened I wouldn't have to exit the vehicle. I could just crawl behind the wheel and leave. I named the lumbering 1984 V-8 Dodge I bought "Juno." The Roman Juno, both a warrior and protectress, would be my patron goddess of the road.

Some nomadic women reported just throwing a sleeping bag in the back of their vehicle and hitting the road. They figured the rest of it out as they went. As for myself, the extensive renovations that I undertook offered me a chance to explore what the concept of home means. Starting from scratch, being limited to only what was necessary, sparked a similar rebuilding of self.

It was these renovations that sparked my first posts on the forums. I'd pushed a desk all my life as a web-designer and had zero handy-woman skills. There was no choice but to reach out and ask for help. I needed to learn how to wire electricity, for example. RVs use both 12v and 120v systems. I also needed to learn how to splice pipes and reroute plumbing. Generous forum members guided me through sealing against leaks, replacing electrical outlets, running and installing 12v accessory sockets, replacing the water pump, installing a kitchen faucet and drains, removing carpet and replacing it with vinyl flooring, sewing curtains, reupholstering cushions, painting, repairing a leaking toilet, unsticking windows, cleaning and detailing the exterior, and many more things I never imagined would be needed. In Section 4, I focus on the concept of liberation and how the women I met understood and experienced it, but I was already discovering a type of liberation in the form of self-sufficiency. My self-esteem and confidence grew as I crossed each task off the list.

2.2 Fieldwork

2.2.1 autoethnography: on the road

The road is different for different women. For me, traveling on my own, in an old vehicle and being responsible for pets, was as anxiety-producing as any scenario I could have imagined. I compounded that stress by attempting to camp in as many contexts as possible. Rest stops, truck stops, parking lots and on public streets were all part of the nomadic experience I was trying to emulate. The disadvantage being I could never get comfortable and relax in the familiar.

Sometimes my fears revolved around the weather. In a Walmart parking lot in Illinois, I would huddle in the dinette during the night waiting for an approaching storm to blow through. Reports warned of hail the size of golf-balls and sixty-mile-per-hour winds. I spent several unplanned nights in a city park in Kansas because seventy-two hours of cross-winds made driving in a slab-sided vehicle impossible. I couldn't keep Juno between the lines, much less out of ditches. In Colorado there was an extra day, in another Walmart parking lot when snow delayed me; I feared slick roads on the upcoming pass. In New Mexico, at a casino RV lot in an otherwise isolated area, it was the thirteen-degree temperatures that rattled me. I recorded in my field notes,

> *The propane furnace has been cutting out, blowing cold, and requiring numerous resets. I don't know how I'm going to manage if it fails during the night. I could seek refuge in the nearby casino, or the 24-hour truck stop, but what about the dog and cat? The cold has become malevolent. Crouching. Waiting for its chance to breach the walls.*

Other times, I worried about my safety as a female. Although Juno never left me stranded, she did have numerous mechanical issues during the first weeks on the road. At a truck stop, where I parked overnight for repairs, I would discover the next morning that my presence there had been discussed around the shop and with other truckers. "We were taking bets whether you are packing a gun in there," the mechanic idly remarked as he leaned over and tested Juno's O2 sensors. I didn't know if the repairs he made worked, but I didn't stay parked in the semi-truck lot a second

night. I grew more confident as the weeks went on but I never stopped worrying. I was constantly aware of my vulnerability as a single woman. Undressing and showering in an empty campground's facilities, for example, was an uneasy and hurried ordeal as I kept one ear cocked. Vigilance was my constant companion.

I also struggled with loneliness despite having access to email and video conferencing via my data plan. Although I never thought of myself as a particularly social person, I wrestled with feelings of displacement. I may have always been on my guard, but simultaneously I also felt as if I was existed on the side of a two-way mirror where I could see through to the other side–but no one over there could see or hear me. Life on the road was unexpectedly unsettling.

2.2.2 participant observation: life as a rubber tramp

My fieldwork may have been a solitary experience much of the time, but the heart of my work revolves around the women I camped with and interviewed. Unlike traditional nomads, rubber trampers are a loosely-connected community of different ages, genders, sexualities, political orientations, and sometimes socio-economic levels. Each woman I met was unique. Their motivations, financial and social situations, and how they felt about living on the road, were often different. Unlike myself, for example, some women thrived on getting out into the backcountry as far as they could, for as long as they could.

I would always introduce myself as an undergraduate student doing thesis work. I took field notes, conducted interviews and, when given permission, took photographs. Many women preferred not to have their pictures taken for both personal safety and privacy concerns. I also invited women, especially those that didn't want to be interviewed, to take an online password-protected survey. This was less for aggregating data, as it was about trying to pull in supporting data when a formal interview wasn't possible and to broaden the project reach.

Once out West, I began with grand ideas of documenting everything–making lists, tracking every expense, mapping, writing field poetry and sketching–but in the end, I would discover a lifestyle that was far from laid-back. Participant observation meant doing things, and just walking my dog, Freyja, each morning often took an hour or more as I stopped to chat with this person or that group. Cooking was a complicated and extended process in a small space and washing dishes was a lengthy process; to conserve water I used the recommended frugal method of using spray bottles of soap and water, and vinegar to rinse. Washing a sink full of dishes at home might have taken five or ten minutes. On the road, it took half an hour. The dust in the desert is omnipresent and I would spend up to two hours each day trying to keep Juno livable. I would wipe the dinette table and five minutes later when I slid my laptop out of the way it would make crunching sounds across the already-accumulated grit. There was also always some repair to be done–as one nomad pointed out, every time you go on the road you are subjecting your vehicle to the forces of a hurricane. Repairs ranged from major ones, like installing more solar and wiring an additional battery bank, to minor ones, such as fixing leaking pipes, running down why a tail light was out, or oiling a sticking awning arm.

The biggest time commitment, however, was accessing resources just so I could boondock and live off-grid. A trip into town would take a whole day as I tried to condense everything into one trip–groceries, dollar store, hardware store, fueling, filling propane, dumping, refilling the water tank, laundry, mail, and getting a shower and washing my hair. Just exiting the vehicle at each stop required a process. I would unplug the backup camera so it wouldn't wear down my battery, make sure vents were up so the interior stayed cool for the pets, turn on the propane fridge in an attempt to keep the food I did have from spoiling[38] and make sure the water pump was turned off. I'd do things in reverse after coming back from the store before moving on, even if it was just three blocks down. To make it between trips, those camped together often relied on others. Daily trash runs were common, as well as being asked to pick up something "if you are going in"–a needed but forgotten grocery item, a package that arrived at the mini-mart, firewood or beer for an impromptu campfire, a snack that's craved, or a lottery ticket.

Most of the nomads I camped with were retired, so many did not work. They did appear to have more leisure time than I did as I was still taking classes remotely and managing some client projects, but rarely were they unoccupied. Campfires and potlucks happened once or twice a week, similar to the mainstream ritual of relaxing on weekends, not every evening. In the end, I had to just "go with the flow": a rubber tramp mantra. I did what I could in the time I had. My focus became to live the experience. I would analyze it later.

3. "Granny Jo": Narratives of Feminine Liberation

I will always think of Granny Sparks[39] *as my de facto welcoming committee into the rubber tramp community…*My hands tremble as Juno lumbers to a halt and I turn the key off, quieting the engine. Four miles into the dusty rutted desert, which I'd only seen before now from the highway, feels alien and devouring; I might as well be on the moon.

I am relieved, after two-thousand and seventy-seven miles across the United States, to have finally–and safely–achieved my destination. However, I'm also equally as terrified to be joining an encampment of strangers.

I'm not even sure this is the right group. Across this landscape, known as the Ehrenberg Sandbowl, [40] hundreds of other campers are spread out. Some are clustered together, some occupy remote points on higher bluffs, but all seem to be camped with no rhyme or reason to their placement. I was extended an invitation through the online Cheap RV Living forums to join this camp, and I had been told there would be signs. It's Thanksgiving Day and they are hosting a potluck. As I'd crawled along at a snail's pace, though, four miles in, I'd found only one sign: a paper plate with what might have been a turkey penciled onto it and duct-taped to a scrub bush–with no indication of which direction on the forked road I should take.

There are eight other RVs, vans and other vehicles parked haphazardly in a loose circle. The elevation above the wash, sandwiched between the dry stream bed and a cliff, is about an eighth of a mile long. The road has forked yet again, the left side disappearing into an ominous dip and the right seems to veer straight up the cliff at its end. A tall and lean man ambles over from the center trailer, one that is covered with solar panels, and I roll down the window. I am praying this is 'jimindenver'– the solar darling of the Cheap RV Living forums, and my online forum contact. He is the one who extended the invitation. It is, he remembers our messages back and forth, and I am thankful to fall out on rubbery legs, talk, and try to get my bearings.

We've barely finished making our introductions when I first hear Granny Jo. At a distance. She doesn't come over; instead, she stands up from her yellow camp chair, a signal flag in this muted ocean of dun-colored dirt, and waves her arms energetically over her head like a drowning swimmer. She calls out in a sing-song voice that carries over the expanse of dirt and rock, "Yooo-hoooo! Yooooooooo-hoooo!"

Disoriented, unsure if she's trying to get my attention, I don't respond. My hesitation, however, goads further action. Thrusting her arms out for balance, she picks her way across the area rug that forms her impromptu front porch and past the edges. She lifts each foot high and then carefully places it before lifting the other–like a crane wading unperturbed through still waters. She only ventures a few steps past the rug she's laid out before repeating herself. This time, in the same large exaggerated movements, she beckoned with both arms. Jim chuckles, waves, and shouts back. "Let her get set up first, Granny!"

Undeterred, she continues, yelling across the distance, motioning and then pointing to the way I'd come and then further down the road–to what I wasn't sure. I made out little of what she was saying, but I finally understood she's offering advice on where to park. Even though Jim was telling me I could settle in anywhere, I unexpectedly felt unsure of myself. What exactly made 'a spot?' In this vast space of furrows, ruts, and clumps of wiry vegetation, there were no campsites–there were no obvious boundaries, no clues to the most advantageous direction to point the nose, or how to maintain any sort of privacy, yet at the same time be part of the group.

Subsequently, I was grateful for her proffered help. All smiles, warmth, and brash rapid-fire assertiveness, Granny Jo, I would later discover, despite being a relative newcomer to the nomad life herself, was the self-proclaimed collector of "newbies."[41] I join her, and she sits heavily back into her chair, motioning me to choose one for myself. The three that are set out are all somewhat precarious, mismatched, and an especially alarming wicker chair leans half-unraveled, sagging like a drunk perched on a barstool. I avoid it and choose a blue webbed chair similar to her own.

The sun picks up the ginger highlights in her blond closely-cropped hair and freckles sprinkle her nose. Clear blue eyes sparkle in her flushed face as she alternately asks questions, tells me about herself, and intersperses the conversation with tantalizing half-tidbits of gossip about people I don't know. Her dog, Tippy–a silky-haired black retriever mix–at the end of a long leash plops down next to her in the shade her seated form creates. She introduces us and then directs me to look at her feet, apologizing for not coming over. On one foot, a second toe crosses under her big toe, which makes walking difficult especially across rough terrain. She wears flimsy green flip-flops, reminiscent of the ones provided after a pedicure. I'm thinking they must be a tripping hazard. She reads my mind and assures me she finds them her best option for walking in the desert. Her tone, to the point and unapologetic, lets me know that at age 69, she is firmly in control of her choices and no one is going to tell her otherwise.

Although not entirely universal, one common theme in my interviews was that of liberation. There were stories of being liberated from the responsibilities of taking care of children–now that they were grown, or, for some women, they were no longer the caregiver for ailing parents or other family members. Many were divorced or widowed and subsequently, no longer expected to "take care of" their husbands. They also had discovered a type of economic liberation by reaching the age where they could draw on their social security benefits. The income granted them freedom from the constraints of full-time employment. Conversely, however, that income was not enough to cover rent and living expenses. Subsequently, two of the women I interviewed said they could have moved in with their children but didn't want to lose their independence. They felt the offer "came with strings" or they were "expected to become the built-in babysitter."

It would be several weeks before Granny Jo would sit down with me for a formal interview. I asked her to share what motivated her to take up this nomad lifestyle, and she told me a little about the road leading to that decision.

> *…I had to go by Kansas City, to go to work, after my husband died because I wasn't quite old enough to get Social Security. And then, my mom had a stroke in oh-nine, so I quit my job, ran down, and lived with them. Daddy died in 2010. My sister took mom back, and I stayed with the house and all her belongings–my mother was a hoarder–so, I cleared all that out. I moved out on [her mother' farm, took care of all the animals for six years, and then one day I'd been watching Nomadic Fanatic and I just–it dawned on me–what am I doing?! I want to go to Yellowstone, again! I want to go see this–I got grandkids in New York I want to see! I want to do things! Why am I wasting away, sitting here with animals that just want me to feed them? I may love them but, I decided, I'm going. And I just told everybody, you know, you want the family pictures, you want this, you want that–what do you want? Nobody wanted anything. I started giving stuff away and by September I was out of the farm, and in October I started my blog, and I took off.*

To finance her escape, she sold her cow to buy her camper van, her pigs for the money to put new tires on it, and finally, her goats to a friend for the money to replace the van's old wiring.

Another nomad, Kat, talks about a similar liberation. Like Granny Jo, she is also 69. The Shirley MacLaine doppelgänger keeps her straight red hair chopped short, drives a motorhome that looks like it was resurrected from the debris of a futuristic movie set, is whip-smart, takes her cat for daily walks–threatening to pepper any loose dogs with bear spray, and does not 'suffer fools gladly.' She says she's always subscribed to what she called itchy feet, and the need, therefore, to keep moving. Her last career saw her working the racehorse circuit. It was the loss of her mother, however, that moved her to take up life on the road full-time. I asked her about that in our interview.

> *My mother had a stroke in early 2016. And when I arrived…come to find out my father was in worse shape than she was. She had been his caregiver, so nobody really knew how bad it was getting. So, it was clear that the time had come and, you know, my brother's useless–and it turns out my sister is deceased. But aside from all of that, there was one person who was going to come and help, and it was me. Every family's got the responsible one? Yeah. So, I ended all of my affairs on the East Coast and I got myself out here, and I dealt with it. My mother died this past June. My father died the preceding September. But it was sort of her…she wanted to hit the road. Now, she had this idea that she was going to come to the racetrack with me. And I'm, uh–"Mom, you don't get into the race track without being licensed, and you can't be licensed without working for a trainer. No trainers are going to hire a disabled woman. What, to work around horses? You won't be able to come to the race track and you can't bring an RV onto the racetrack. They won't allow it. But–we could get an RV. We could hit the road. Go see as much of the country as you have life left." As fate would have it, her physical condition deteriorated so fast there was no way I could separate her from her medical services. So, but, the building of the RV had already begun.*

According to the National Caregiving Alliance, "upwards of 75% of all caregivers are female." [42] The women I talked to all felt that it was expected of them, as women, to take care of family members that fell ill. Or like Kat, felt they were the best option. Statistics bear that out, noting that male caregivers spend less time caregiving–40% of them paying for outside help–and when they do step in, they don't perform personal duties, such as bathing assistance.[43] For these women, when they were no longer needed as caregivers, boundaries such as roles, responsibilities, and familial identities were erased. They could now explore outside of what had been–for all their adult lives–the often-confining territory of putting others' needs before their own.

While my research focused on the experiences of women, I generally tried to refrain from a comparative analysis of genders. However, as it relates to liberation, there was one stark difference between the men and women in this 50+ age range that demonstrated to me how this newfound release from the confines of caregiving can play out; while men were likely to be open to and pursue romantic partnerships, women were more often reluctant. One night at a campfire, a male rubber tramp–one who I'd just met and who had indulged in a few beers–shared with me what he was looking for in a woman. Leaning in close and lowering his voice, he said, "She'll be the kind of woman that will snuggle up to me at four o'clock in the morning, bat her eyes at me, and say 'honey, honey wake up, I want to…" He winks at me, chuckles and continues, "…honey, I want to go fishing.'" I was confronted with that type of candor regularly from men. It was nonthreatening, but there was no room for misunderstanding. They would welcome a relationship that went beyond sexual intimacy and offered committed companionship.

Anna, an earthy and no-nonsense retiree that was financing her lifestyle with a government pension, was courted by a man in the camp from the first day he met her. She, however, expressed ambivalence towards him as the weeks went

by. She was fond of him but didn't want to "take on" a relationship and all the responsibilities she felt that could potentially entail. She was especially concerned about his severe health problems, and what that might mean in the future. Some of it was fear of the heartache that could come with loss, but much of our conversation revolved around how the future might play out, and how caregiving might tie her down. The two did pair up during the winter months, but it would be the end of the season before she fully committed to traveling together going forward.

When I asked other women if they also noticed these differences in how the sexes approached romance on the road, one woman I met put it to me this way, "Well, of course! Men have it good in relationships. As for me, I am never washing a man's socks again." One woman, after our formal interview, pointed out to me, "All the men out here quote from *On Walden Pond*, but you know, Thoreau only lived on the other side of the pond from his mother. And he took his laundry home for her to wash." Headache, who I'll introduce in the next section, was open to the idea of a romance, but when she realized the camping partner who had made overtures, also had a drinking problem, she said, "I told him to go figure it out. My ex was like that, and I've been there." She didn't relent and soon after, the two of them would part ways permanently.

I continued to doubt what I was observing, however, thinking because of my own bias, I was too easily falling for clichéd cultural expectations. Then I received a series of emails, across several months, from one of my project participants. Wanderer, a petite and attractive widow who favored craft projects and cigarettes, found herself romanced by the owner of an auto body shop where she enlisted services. The repairs to her RV were extensive, so she needed to live in the business's lot for several weeks while parts were ordered and work was being done. The owner would bring her roses and show her around the town, finding places for her to indulge her hobby of nature photography. She, like Anna, was flattered from the outset, but also frustrated. She was attracted to her admirer, but was resistant to the bonds she feared a relationship would impose. She did stay after her RV was fixed. More weeks went by when she wrote, "I am still at loose ends because I do not know what I want!! Still!!! You can understand this I know. You know how men are-they want someone to cook, clean and have sex with. He is like that, but he is so caring and real. He appreciates anything that I do so much. I do have to maybe set some boundaries-like I won't get up and cook you breakfast at 6AM!!!" Notably, he also wasn't interested in the traveling lifestyle she envisioned for herself. Ultimately, Wanderer did commit, and the two partnered in a common-law marriage and she remained "in place," but not without some reservations on her part.

Not all of the nomad women subscribed to this reluctance. Granny Jo was as giddy as a school-girl after going to meet one of the YouTube celebrities she followed online. I noticed she was more made-up than usual. She was breathless as she told us back at camp about the encounter. He had hugged her, and we good-naturedly teased her about "having a crush." At other times, too, Granny Jo was not shy about expressing her hopes to meet a romantic partner; this despite having been through several marriages, including one that was emotionally abusive.

> *GJ: Suicide was something I tried once. But all I wanted was out of my marriage. My doctor comes and said, "Why did you do that?" …She said, "You want to get rid of your husband?" and I said, "Yeah, I'm miserable."*
> *Dawn: I hope she said, well, get a divorce…*
> *GJ: Yes, that's right, she did! She said, "Why are you doing this to yourself? Do the right thing." And I did.*

I didn't see this as a paradox. Humans are complex and we often embrace competing desires. We emotionally shift between contradictory situations as we try to find a balance, especially when we want to be loved. However, there was another arena where I did find these contradictions perplexing. On one hand, many of these women spoke of no longer needing to conform to the domestic activities they'd spent their lives carrying out, yet I often saw these same women engaging in community roles I might have expected them to eschew. Granny Jo, for example, would make it her business to know who needed food at the end of the month, as proverbial (and literal) belts were tightened. Almost all the older rubber trampers depend on some type of regular social security or disability deposit. I watched Kat spend the week before Christmas organizing a food drive for two nomads who were more down-on-their-luck than most.

Of all the women I interviewed, though, Kat understood her "wanderlust," as she called it, to be outside of these concepts of liberation. It was something that had always been part of who she was. I asked her about that mobility.

Kat: …I enjoy it. But more than that I need it. Every time I've tried to live somewhere, after about three or four months I'm insufferable. I can't stand to be there anymore and all I can think about is how do I get out.

> *Dawn: Do you feel trapped? I don't want to put words in your mouth.*
> *Kat: Well, I'm never trapped because I don't put myself–not since I finished raising kids–I don't put myself in a position where I can't get out, where I feel trapped. But, you know you're always leaving something. And so, you know, in a way you feel like, you know–like my friends call me their runaway friend–just–you know,*

because you feel like you've got ties to a place, or people, and so you're always leaving something. Get used to saying goodbye.
Dawn: So, you say you get used to it so that's something that you come to terms with? Is it something that–it's okay?
Kat: Well, it's the only viable alternative. Either you live in sticks-and-bricks, and you put down those roots, right? And, you know, you–and you drive to work, and back, and to work and back, and, you know, you dig that furrow so deep that ultimately, it's your grave. Or you stop. You don't do that anymore.

For Kat, there was no contradiction in offering herself as a cook for potlucks or organizing a food drive and her identity as an independent woman. When she was displeased, or not valued, she could simply leave. Nomadism offered her an escape route.

Additionally, I noted at the RTR, although headed by a man–and one might say a feminist one–almost all of the volunteers and the staff supporting the event, and organizing, were female. Beth, one of the RTR staff, talked about what she has observed from her years helping other women nomads. She agreed with me that women seemed to take the lead on identifying hardships and allocating resources–creating an informal network of social services within the rubber tramp community. She felt that gendered split in the community was a natural consequence of how life skills have always been gendered. Women might cook or share knowledge of where to find the cheapest groceries while men might offer things like assistance with engine repair. Beth did note a negative aspect of women finding themselves alone after their role of being someone's "other," had been erased. She said there were a growing number of women coming on the road who were having a hard time adjusting.

It's not just having a companion. Some of them have never learned to live by themselves, for themselves, and with themselves...It's the way they were raised–they never thought that being on their own was the right way to be: that you were missing something if you didn't have a partner. And it all goes back to an awful lot of upbringing, ingrained societal concepts–even if they weren't emphasized in their own home, they were emphasized somewhere.

This statement didn't strike me as applicable to Granny Jo, however. As we talked about her YouTube channel, and what it meant to her, our conversation took an unexpected turn, offering some insight into her motivations.

GJ: I mean who thought that at 69 my life would go from a boob tube, a bad leg, to coming out here and finding people who are having it so much rougher than me. And I can teach them to cook, or how to do this, or how to thrive, or how to come out of their shell, or just to get to communicate with me. So. And hook them up with other people of their own caliber, and just network…So it's–it's exhilarating–it's scary–but it's fun. Because I have a purpose. It may not be a gigantic purpose, but it's a purpose for me, and that's what it's about. It's going forward and taking others with you and throwing them ahead of you so they can make a path for whoever.
Dawn: So, before you got on the road you didn't feel like you had a purpose?
GJ: As a caretaker. I guess I am now come to think of it [laughs], I didn't change my roles. [continues laughing] Darn! I never thought about that. But I have humans, now, to take care of...and…you're going to make me cry. [long silence] I never thought about it that way. [another long silence] I guess I never left that role…

Like many of the women I interviewed, Granny Jo didn't set out to "find herself," as it is commonly referred to in popular psychology. However, it seems inevitable that these women will spend time soul searching as a result of the challenges they face. Liberation is a two-edged sword. The erasure of boundaries offers freedom, certainly–but it also destroys the familiar, and often foundational, understanding of self. Each woman will have to make her own choice. Will she look to resurrect the lines of a better self "elsewhere?" Will she fiercely avoid being confined–seeking freedom each time she puts the key in the ignition? Or, will she rebuild the boundaries to suit herself? Granny Jo found herself returning to her origins; she was still a "caretaker." This time, however, she believes it to be on her terms, and therefore, true to the ideals of rubber tramping–authentic.

4. “Headache”: Experiences of Displacement

I met “Headache” in that first camp in Ehrenberg. It was during the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, though, that I would come to know her better. The fifty-three-year-old is frank from the outset about her backstory and the challenges she faces. Diagnoses of PTSD and Borderline Personality Disorder, a bad back, and a mouth devoid of teeth, belied my first and continued impression of a cheerful and capable woman. She kept her waist-length brown hair, touched only by a few strands of gray, in a neat ponytail. Her face is pleasantly round, her skin clear, and her eyes are sharp and penetrating. She has to use a cane at times and with it, or without, she moves in short bursts of intensity. She has a cynical sense of humor and sometimes I am unsure whether she is responding literally or being sarcastic. When I ask her if her gender influenced her choice of a vehicle she responded, “No, because inanimate objects don't "care" what sex you are.”

The camp in Ehrenberg dispersed after Christmas, scattering under the threat of fines for overstaying the two weeks BLM limit. Although there was talk of everyone meeting and parking near each other at the RTR, once there, Headache and I find spaces scarce among the packed chaos of the wash-lined rows. I find a spot instead on the outer edges of the event, while she chooses a handicapped-designated spot[44] near the center campfire. She’ll be able to volunteer, and it is also conveniently–and purposefully–near the free-pile.[45] During the next two weeks, she would regale me daily with stories of her “finds.” It was an important resource for a woman who, prior from coming down from Washington State, had been one of the statistically homeless.

Over the two weeks of the RTR, we talked often and continued a friendship by phone after I returned East. A favorite topic is her American Indian heritage. She is of Abenaki descent, and “others too, but that came up most often.” Growing up, however, her family was fully assimilated into what she describes as a relatively middle-class, blue-collar, and otherwise “white” American background. She drove a bakery truck for many years, delivering to grocery stores, as well as working as a long-haul trucker. Her hair is a point of pride: a connection to the Native American identity and community she feels she was kept distanced from.

Like many of the women I met, she has strong opinions and is not shy to share them. Soon after her arrival at the Ehrenberg encampment she made enemies. When unleashed dogs marked their territory, peeing on her van’s tires or her table and chair, she would first yell a warning. If the dog persisted, she would toss a rock or jab a kick–although on both counts she purposely aimed to miss. Not unexpectedly, however, this did not go over well with the animals’ owners; grumbling and animosity ensued. I found her sensitive to criticism, but she brushed off their objections. This was not unusual among the older women I talked to. Most felt they “didn’t have time” to please or coddle others’ feelings. Headache asserted that she was only interested in specific friendships. If someone didn’t agree with her, she wasn’t interested in having them in her circle. On occasion, Headache did join the campfires, but more often she preferred to sit in the driver’s seat of her van, just past the edges of the circle’s camaraderie, her face lit blue and disembodied in the darkness of the interior as she watched movies downloaded on her phone.

Favoring dark colors and comfortable sweats, Headache was accompanied as she did chores around her van, such as washing dishes, by Lily: her squirmy, but otherwise well-behaved, dachshund. The dark blue 1992 Ford Club Wagon van has been half-stripped of decals on one side, but on the other ‘Dive, Paddle, Play’ is still legible–a testament to its former life in Washington state. It was once used by a recreation center, “until it was deemed too decrepit to haul kids in,” she tells me. “It sat for five years, they donated it to Volunteers of America, who then bulk-sold a bunch of crap to a junk car dealer, where I bought it.” Although it seemed to be at the end of its useful life, she had put considered thought into its purchase. “The reason I bought the van was because they hauled kids; so there were federal and state regs they [the rec center] had to meet regarding repair and maintenance.” I often spy her calico cat, Pita–“an acronym for pain-in-the-ass,” she confides–sunning himself on the dash.

One morning, a few weeks after we met, Headache drove back in from her morning trip to the Mini-Mall. She stopped on the road to talk, opening the door and shifting halfway in her seat to block Lily from trying to exit. She had tears in her eyes. Pita had not eaten in several days and also stopped drinking. She’d stayed up with him all night as he crouched under the covers. She was exhausted and spent from crying and was terrified for his health. It was still a week until the end of the month when her disability check would be deposited into her bank account so she couldn’t afford a vet. Pita had, however, she said, drank a little, so talking it through it seemed like the issue wasn’t yet critical. It would be okay to continue to wait and watch. It shook me deeply that morning to see her facing the possibility her cat might die because she couldn’t pay for its care. Battling depression, on top of her other physical and emotional challenges, Pita and Lily are her only real psychological supports.

Pita did get better, but it was a powerful reminder of how perilously close to the edge Headache lives. Whereas many women find themselves free of the responsibility of caregiving, choosing the road as an opportunity to explore new-found liberation, others like Headache are seeking a better definition of what they call home after finding

themselves displaced. Because of dire financial straits, they have been forced out of their homes and communities. The feminization of poverty is a well-known issue. Jessica Bruder points out that,

> According to the 2015 census figures, among older women living alone, more than one in six are below the poverty line. Nearly twice as many elderly women in America are poor (2.71 million) than their male counterparts (1.49 million). And when it comes to Social Security benefits, female recipients get on average $341 a month less than men because of lower total payroll tax contributions, an under-recognized consequence of the gender wage gap.[46]

In addition to the gender wage gap, and time out of the workforce for caregiving, women experience more acute poverty as they age because they are pushed out of the workforce sooner than men. Gen, a rubber tramper now in her sixties, tells me she experienced this form of displacement. She'd managed Goodwill stores for her entire career, rising to upper management, but then at age 46, after moving to another town, was unable to get another management job–not only with Goodwill, but for any retail store. She believes it was her age that rendered her unemployable. This isn't an isolated narrative. In Bruder's *Nomadland*, Linda May worked at Home Depot in a higher paying position, as well, but at a certain age–also after moving–she found she was unable to re-enter at the same level, and ultimately was only offered a cashier position.

Not only is poverty more of an issue as women age, but living on the road is considered more dangerous for females, making this a more challenging undertaking. When I told others what I was doing for my fieldwork, a common response from other women would be, "I would be so scared!" Whether the road is more dangerous or not, is not as important as the fact that it is perceived to be. It is assumed that the road, a free-wheeling adventurous space for men, is a place of heightened danger for women. A woman who chooses to live on the road is making herself more vulnerable than if she stayed within a rooted community.

Life on the road, for these women, is a better alternative to shelters or living on the streets. Living in a vehicle offers more protection to women who are especially vulnerable to physical violence. That said, living on the road is considered more dangerous for females, making this a more challenging undertaking. When I told others what I was doing for my fieldwork, a common response from other women was, "I would be so scared!" Whether the road is actually more dangerous or that is a perception is debated around the campfire. However, back in mainstream communities, it is assumed that the road–a free-wheeling adventurous space for men–is a space of heightened danger for women. A woman who chooses to live on the road is therefore making herself more vulnerable than if she stayed within a rooted community.

While gendering is culturally innate–expectations of gender performance cutting both ways–the blade is sharper when pointed at women.[47] It is more dangerous to live as female-bodied anywhere, and statistics show the U.S. is not exempt. Cat-calling, spousal abuse, and rape are the types of physical intimidations and brutality rarely suffered by heterosexual men. The facts and figures surrounding femicide, for example, demonstrates the disparity of gendered violence, while the feminization of poverty tells a consequential story of how women are devalued. This displacement, then, comes with more risks for women.

In our interview, I asked Headache about the circumstances that led to her becoming homeless.

> *Well. One of the reasons was I had moved back to…Washington state holds a lot of bad memories for me…but…my dad was born and raised there. He loved it. And when he got sick with cancer, again, I chose to move back to take–help take care of him until he died...I had been renting a room with a friend who set me up with meeting the gentleman next door. He wanted somebody to watch his house, in the winter, while he was in Florida. He was a snowbird. And I thought, "that's fantastic–six months out of the year I have the whole place to myself and the other six months I have a roommate." So, I did this for three and a half years. Till his son took over management of the property and promptly gave me notice that my tenancy was going to end…As it was I didn't get all my stuff out when I, you know, by 11:59 on January the 12th. This is the other wonderful thing–right in the middle of winter. In Washington state. So, it's cold and I'm now in the van. But what I did do, before I was gone from the house was I found a church parking program.*[48]

Why did she decide to travel south, then, rather than stay in Washington where she was at least able to take advantage of the church and community's social safety nets?

> *I got tired of losing places to live. Whether it was a natural disaster–I survived a hurricane–uh–a tornado. Whether it was they raised the rent so high that my subsidy wouldn't cover it. Whether, you know, just a number of things over the last ten years prompted me to want to do something that I felt I would have more*

control over, and somebody wasn't–I wasn't at somebody else's mercy. That was the biggest catalyst for me to do this.

Living as a rubber tramper felt, to her, like a way to improve her circumstances rather than be at their mercy. I questioned her about that ideal of gaining control of her life. Had she found that on the road?

No, that is definitely a fallacy. And it doesn't actually hit home until after you're out here. You know, I thought I'd be to deal with it just fine. I was a long-haul truck driver for a number of years: lived in the cab of a semi, so I was like, "Hey, I can handle these small spaces." But, in the transition, I didn't bring with me the fact that everywhere I went [as a truck driver] there were amenities. I was parked at truck stops or at a terminal that had showers or a restaurant–so all my needs were always taken care of. Then I get out here and realize not only do I have to do these things, or supply these things, I also have to pay for them. So, my first actual month, like, down here in the desert was an incredibly rude awakening.

The YouTubers and many of the bloggers that promote this lifestyle speak of the benefits of living simply, of being free, unfettered, and how cheap the lifestyle can be. For those that are pushed out of–displaced–from their homes, life on the road appears as a viable way to remain independent and even live abundantly. The Cheap RV Living website peppers its budgeting how-to guide with quotes like Thoreau's "We make ourselves rich by making our wants few," and Margaret Fuller's "Men for the sake of getting a living forget to live." The same budgeting article references a nomad known as "Desert Rat" saying, "He draws $1,000 a month from Social Security and tries to live on half that amount, which he usually does...At the beginning of the month he takes out a few hundred dollars in cash to pay for food, gas and miscellaneous expenses...He rarely spends more than $500 a month…" [49]

Subsequently, the idea is born that this lifestyle is doable on $500 a month. On the homepage of the website is a graphic that compares expenses on $500 a month budget and a $1000 a month budget.[50] Headache and I have agreed both are unrealistic. The budgets downplay fuel expenses (the verbiage suggests that mobility, paradoxically, isn't necessary) and the budgets do not accommodate commonplace needs like medical expenses–which many older nomads have. I ask Headache about her struggle to stretch a monthly disability subsidy to cover the expenses she's encountering.

I knew I was going to have to buy ice.[51] *And I knew it was going to cost a lot. But it just, you know, I didn't have any reality as far as the actual cost: how much I would have to get. I also found that–I am using the bucket method to go to the bathroom–but, I didn't have a way to store it…The whole idea that I had in mind, was, I'd be able to come out here and sit for a week and, you know, commune with people watch the stars, and what have you. Instead, I found myself driving into town almost every day for one thing or another. And the cost of that gas added up a lot. But the cost of the ice, you know, I'm looking at least fifteen dollars a week, and I guess, maybe closer to twenty, now. I wasn't expecting that. I mean I knew I was going to be paying for it, but I didn't think it would be that much. You know, and then on top of that, there were probably a handful of mornings where it was really cold. It was 34 degrees [°F]. And I have no accessory sort of heat in the van. So in order to warm up–because I have arthritis and I would be incredibly stiff–I would have to start the van. Get the heat going in that. So, that part was almost kind of an afterthought because I had to go into town anyway to buy ice, or this or that, so. But it added up.*

Some vandwellers use trash bag-lined buckets for toilets, throwing their waste away in commercial dumpsters. Trying to cut down on her trips into town, Headache replaces her bucket setup with a chemical camping toilet she finds abandoned. She can empty it at the Mini-Mall's dump station.[52] This means incurring dumping fees and adding the cost of treatment chemicals to her budgeting, but she's calculated it can offer fuel savings and, importantly, it will be more comfortable to use. One morning we both drive in and dump at the same time. I could see it was an ordeal for her to manage the heavy contents with a bad knee. She has to negotiate a careful balancing act to situate the tank so she can pour it down the drain without splashing the contents. I offer to help but she refuses.

It's an imperfect solution in other ways. She tells me there is a crack at the top of the unit–probably why the toilet was left for trash. This means that once she uses it, despite the odor-masking chemicals, her van smells like sewage until she can dump–and then for some time afterward. One day after dumping, she crossed over the state line to go into Blythe, California for supplies. At the border is an agricultural station and while the agents normally wave RVs and campers through, this morning she is stopped. Her driver's side window doesn't roll down, so she has to open the door. She recalls the inspector's face as he leaned in to inspect the back. "He just got a face full of my stink," she squeals in embarrassment relating the story, "of all the times!"

The weeks between Christmas and the RTR many of original camp traveled, exploring or going down to the border to take advantage of cheap dental work in Los Algodones, Mexico. Headache didn't follow because she didn't have the money for gas. Instead, she was happy to find a parking lot that was closer to the Mini-Mall where she could camp. She told me she felt safe there and that she was never bothered by the police, truckers, or indigents. I camped next to her only one night in what I would afterward come to call "Depression Lot." It looked mostly abandoned except for a disreputable-looking yellow and black van that looked like it might once have been a food truck hunched on the far side. Filled with weeds and rubble, the lot was pitted with holes that were damp with brackish, oil-slicked water. Trash littered the edges. Being situated next to the interstate it was bathed in the constant noise of passing semis. Exiting trucks hit their Jake brakes to slow down, generating great tornado-like roars every fifteen seconds. When I walked the dog before turning in, we had to avoid a pile of human feces deposited on a slab of broken concrete.

Throughout that night I heard large trucks, one right after the other, pull in and out. Their headlights seeped through the slats of Juno's window blinds, raking the walls. The trucks sounded like they were parking right next to us before killing their ignitions–only to start up again a few minutes later to leave. Unable to sleep, I imagined drug deals, gun-running, and prostitution rings. Headache just laughed the next morning when I voiced my anxiety. "I don't even hear it," she tells me, "they are just switching out trailers. I'm used to it." She was alone in Depression Lot for weeks and the isolation wore on her, but Headache would also say she was grateful. The Mini-Mall she relied on was just over the bridge–she was not just saving on fuel, but also wear and tear on her van not having to go back and forth over the miles of washboard road into the Sandbowl.

At the RTR, as we exclaimed over her finds from the free-pile, I saw a tension develop. On one hand, she felt more prosperous than she had been in a long time, accumulating things she needed–or felt she would need for future projects, like setting up a solar panel system–but on the other, she was dealing with the reality that she had no room in her van for these new acquisitions. Her solution, although she admitted it was a problematic one on her budget, was to keep a local storage unit. It was, she hoped, a temporary adaptation as she worked to improve her situation and save up for a different vehicle.

> *I can't stand up in the van; I don't have a high top. And that's continuing to be a challenge for me. I do have spinal arthritis. I do have osteoarthritis in my knees–so being stooped over in the van has become increasingly painful. And with other challenges, such as simply wiping after going to the bathroom, or picking something up off the floor is–standing up and walking upright I took for granted… [I want to] save up to get a travel trailer; where I can stand upright and feel like I can walk like a human being again.*

I would continue to keep up with Headache after I returned from my fieldwork. Her optimism surged as she received some money, unexpectedly, from a family member. It would potentially allow her to buy the trailer she wanted. Her depression returned however as it was soon spent on a new timing chain and then ball and joint replacements for her van. The BLM roads had taken another victim, despite her care to always drive slowly.

As we close one of our phone conversations, Headache remembers something she forgot to tell me–she's cut her hair. It is razored short now, she tells me. This takes me by surprise, knowing how proud she was of it, and I ask carefully if she likes the new cut. "No," she says, "I hate it." Not understanding, I ask, then "Why did you do it?" Her response is matter-of-fact, "Because it took too much water to wash." She hadn't been able to afford showers, so she was relying on a solar shower for bathing–one of her free-pile finds. The black, sun-heated bag holds two gallons, but at eight pounds per gallon, she can only lift half of that. It has to be hung over her head for gravity to take over and make it into a shower. She's pragmatic about the haircut. Ultimately, she tells me, it will grow back. Thinking of her heritage, I ask if cutting her hair was a spiritual sacrifice. The conversation pauses as she thinks about this. "Well, for a lot of nations the strength of your prayers is determined by hair length–especially by the women. Whether I believe that or not–I vacillate–I still prefer my hair as long as I can grow it." I couldn't imagine a goddess who wouldn't applaud her sacrifice.

The promise of a frugally-lived, but otherwise abundant life–one that includes a friendly and welcoming community of the like-minded–is seductive to women that have been economically displaced. Like Headache, they perceive they can gain control and find the independence to pursue a better life echoing Hoey's "option of elsewhere." There is some truth in this. The rubber tramp community's generosity is undeniable–advice forums, free-piles, offers of free skilled labor, and the informal support networks that women spontaneously generate in encampments do aid and elevate the situation of the dispossessed. Many rubber trampers told me they felt life on the road offered them the potential to get their "lives back together." They felt this was impossible in the situations they had left–that "back there" they would always be scrambling to keep up. The reality, however, is that the lifestyle may require more emotional fortitude, to take advantage of that potential, than most realize. Several women confided that they have concerns that those who promote the nomadic lifestyle on social media are not painting an accurate picture of its

challenges. Each year as more join what the community understands to be a movement, they are seeing more women, especially those with mental challenges–anxiety, depression, traumatic brain injuries[54]–struggle and fail despite support. These women saw a YouTuber living in her car, and said to themselves, "If she's living out of a Ford Focus, so can I." Going on the road, however, ultimately worsens their situation when they can't meet the emotional challenges and sacrifices the life entails. I think of another passage by Heat-Moon,

> The crossing became a grim misadventure, and I wasn't prepared for it. I tried to think of other things. Helen Keller, who never drove the Clinch Mountains, said life is a daring adventure or it is nothing. Adventure–an advent. But no coming without a going. Death and rebirth. Antithetical notions lying next to each other, as on a globe the three-hundred-sixtieth degree does to the first. Past and future.[55]

Crossing boundaries, then, do not guarantee liberation for all these women; displacement does not always outpace the negative energies of their original circumstance. Not all their baggage is left behind when women opt for life as a rubber tramp.

5. "RV Joey": Acts of Transgression

The weeks following the RTR do not go as anticipated. I intend to camp with one or more of the women I have interviewed but instead find myself tasked with looking for a vet. Freyja developed a skin infection and it turns out to be an almost incomprehensibly difficult challenge. There is no vet in Quartzsite. The only vet in Blythe refused to see her as they weren't taking on new patients. Calling vets in nearby towns, and in an ever-widening circle, I eventually found one in Yuma. But because follow-up care was required, I would end up staying south for the next three weeks. Everyone else had other plans so for most of this time I was alone. Sometimes I stayed in the casino parking lots–noisy and crowded at times. When I had a full week between check-ups, I would camp at the Imperial Dam LTVA, thirty miles north of Yuma. It was a drive that took me through date farms and into the increasingly isolated desert. I would drive down gravel roads for miles, past abandoned RV campgrounds, never seeing another soul until I reached the LTVA at the perimeter of the government weapons testing range.

During those times I would be near hundreds of other campers, yet I found myself feeling displaced again. Despite attempting to reach out, posting notices about my project on the bulletin board, trying to initiate conversations while walking Freyja, and also joining a meditation class, I was unable to make any connections. LTVA residents tend to be regulars each season, marking their territories with boundaries of stones, creating not just "yards" but entire "neighborhoods." Mindful of this, I drove through some of them before setting up camp, trying to get a feel for the atmosphere, and became painfully aware of the difference between my motorhome and theirs. Although these people were white, and mostly my age, their expensive fifth-wheels, golf carts and ATVs, and obvious designations of identity–signs saying "Pat and John's Place," metal flower sculptures, "Jesus Loves Me" placards and retired military bumper stickers–made me feel as if a newcomer might be unwelcome if they didn't "fit." Especially one in an old motorhome. I am no stranger to gated communities, and this is what the little enclaves that had been marked out in the desert felt out. While I had tried not to mark Juno with anything that would hint at my political convictions, the motorhome itself was an identifier of socio-economic class. I didn't fit here. Ultimately, I parked at the top of a ridge at a distance.

My instincts proved correct. I never personally met Iska–a 41-year-old nomad who responded to one of those notices after I had already left Imperial Dam–but we would email back and forth, I conducted a video interview, and she would fill out the project's online survey. To the question asking if she felt her gender posed any additional challenges in this nomadic lifestyle, she responded,

> *I find when I am in areas of the country with strong Christian religious leanings, that my gender, coupled with being single, being black, having tattoos can make people uncomfortable. One would say that this is a challenge but I don't let it bother me. Mostly I find it amusing. For example, I moved to an area within Imperial Dam recently with some friends. At the LTVA you must have a self-contained*[56] *unit. I do not, but my friends do. The neighbors were glaring and having a fuss about me being there. They called the office and a ranger came out. He saw no problem, and gave a hint that he thought it was just people trying to make trouble, and that I was fine. Very annoying.*

Before and during the RTR, when I felt connected to the community, I focused on women crossing boundaries of liberation and displacement. Now, however, I was entrenched in a deepening solitude. I became more aware of bodily

inserting myself into spaces where I stood out and didn't fit. Fears for my physical safety, like when I traveled across the country, once again dominated my thoughts. I was not confronted by any threatening incidents, but there were little reminders. One morning at a casino, for example, I happened upon a vagrant in an unfrequented area down by the river while on a morning walk. Aware there was no one else around, and fearful of being victimized, I didn't continue what had been–until then–a beautiful and peaceful stroll. My freedom had parameters on it. Subsequently, I started to better appreciate how fear becomes a method of socially containing women within boundaries. Esther Madriz, in an article entitled, "Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls," writes "One of the most significant mechanisms in the control of women's lives is the fear of crime. Its influence is masked by the common belief that fear of crime imposes limitations upon women's lives 'for their own sake…'"[57] When I camped with others, I had lost sight of my location on the fringes. I even questioned if the rubber trampers truly occupied the fringes. The weeks after the RTR, however, I was reminded just what a radical act it is for a woman to live on the road.

By the time I returned to Ehrenberg and checked into the La Posa LTVA to interview RV Joey, therefore, I was depressed, anxious and feeling disconnected. Not only that, but Joey was one of those celebrity YouTubers that I had "followed" during my research phase. I found myself bitten by unexpected shyness. I had been dismissed by other YouTubers I had approached, so more than anything, I just wanted to get the interview over with it. [58] I camped nearby and by text messages arranged for me to visit her RV once I finished setting up. I fortified myself with a fast drink. The interview was going to be my one nod to this important aspect of the rubber tramp culture.

Instead of awkwardness, however, I found myself enveloped in warmth and welcome. Joey's laugh is infectious and I can hear it even as I make my way over to her motorhome and around the nearly four-foot pile of laundry she's mounded onto a tarp. She wears a straw cowboy hat–the sides curled up–pulled down over reddish-brown hair that falls around her shoulders. She contains an effervescence that bubbles and spills out as she talks. Like jewels, she offers nugget after nugget of insights and advice, her "wads of wisdom," she calls them, admonishing me that she's copywriting that phrase and going to use it as the title of a book she's thinking of writing. This self-deprecating humor is also evident when I ask her what name I should use. "RV Joey" is the title of her YouTube channel.

> *Oh, Joey. RV Joey is like, yeah, you don't have to refer to me as RV Joey. And a funny story–cause I was at the RTR and you get caught up in all these hugs and people like "RV Joey! RV Joey!"–and I went to the potluck. This guy's serving and, you know, you just think everyone knows you, and he's like, "What's your name?"*
> *"RV Joey."*
> *And he's like, "Your name's RV?!"*
> *And I looked at myself which is not–this is hard to do by the way when you're in public–but I was like, what an idiot! I'm introducing myself in a public forum as RV Joey–like "I'm RV Joey"–as if I was somebody.*
> *And I'm like–he goes–"Your name's RV?" And I'm like, "Yeah!" Yeah! Cause, I thought, I'm not backing down here. I've got to hold on to this embarrassing moment to the very end. I'm holding my own here like this was intentional. It's like–"well, I want more of this."*
> *And I just thought I'd move on, and he was like, "RV? What, what does that stand for?" And I'm just like, I'm out. I just couldn't. Very rarely do I not have a response. I just was like, [stutter sound] "–never mind." I–I–I just couldn't come up with anything other than, "I'm nobody. I'm sorry. I thought you would know who I was." It was an embarrassing moment. Wish I had caught on tape, but anyway. So, Joey's good. Joey's good.*

Like many of the women I've met, I find she looks younger than her age. At 59, RV Joey does not pull social security or disability. She lives on the proceeds from her YouTube channel, and by selling an MLM[59] program of supplements she feels has been integral to her healing. Four years ago, sick and exhausted–often unable to walk, referring to her condition as fibromyalgia[60]–she talks about how she lived in an RV even before leaving her sticks-and-bricks life. It was how she adapted so she could show up to the businesses she and her husband jointly owned, "People loved me and I felt–I kept feeling inadequate and life just made me feel so inadequate because all they ever saw was this. "Oh, you're beautiful and normal and funny and rich and you have everything." And I had nothing. I had no me. So. They–no one could believe that I just said I'd rather have nothing. And I'm gonna go off and be nothing. Because, then, maybe I get to show up–and I have! I love me!"

Joey's story is a complicated narrative. On one hand, she forcefully pushed herself out of a situation that would have seemed, to most, to offer the most security for her chronic and debilitating condition. She filed for divorced and stopped "showing up," as she called it, and living for others. She described how she felt about the community she once lived in, saying "They were takers...they showed up because they wanted the alcohol and the food. I had all the money. They were my employees or my friends' kids. Um, and, it was like, I was–people just took from me and I got nothing. So, I was always left depleted and I had to–hired people to do everything."

After leaving the marriage, however, her investments soured and her health continued to deteriorate. Like Headache, she began to feel the squeeze of economic displacement and decided it would be a natural fit to take up a life on the road because of her experience living in RVs. She was sorting through her paperwork when she realized she still owned her first motorhome. "I had to find this RV. I had lost it for four years. It was in a junkyard in Texas, because the mechanic [here] who had it…got hit by a tornado…and it was long gone." Having a clear title, she decided she would run it down.

Finding it would not, however, be her biggest challenge. What situates her act specifically as transgressive was less about what she would face on the road, but facing familial opposition before she left. Women on the road often told me stories of family disapproval. Usually, however, discouragement and objections came from a distance. These women were usually already on the outside edges of family life that had been centralized in other places; their children had moved away, married, and had families of their own to focus on. How much of the opposition that she faced originated from fear for her safety, and how much of it was a reaction to a woman stepping out of the role she is expected to fill is difficult to untangle. She tells me,

> *My family was not helping. Nobody was gonna support this dream. I had a van, and I was living in my van. I bought a twelve-hundred-dollar 1990 van, and in ten-below-zero weather, with a cold, I drove out of Michigan and drove to Texas, and my family wouldn't even–didn't even want me to park it. They were like "No. No. Just come here we'll help you." And when I drove there, they would help me, but it was conditional and I chose not to accept those conditions. I chose to be true to my heart. So, with frostbite on my face, I went back into my van and went back to Wal-Mart. And I froze. I was like [sobs], "I'm so frickin' happy." It was in Denton, and I thought, "This." Like, they don't get it. Like I'm happy in this van. I want to live in this van. I want to tow a trailer. I want my RV in the junkyard–but I didn't know where it was. It took me a long time to find the mechanic and find it, but–they wouldn't help me.*

Joey found herself choosing the path of self-exile. This is an idea that Irit Rogoff says is the natural result of "exhausted geographies." In reframing the efforts of artists in the conflict-torn Middle East, he describes his understanding of what happens when community boundaries become entities that only exist to serve themselves, rather than support the needs of its members.

> These "exhausted geographies" are neither the maps, nor the traces of territorial entities, but rather the 'lines of flight' that exit from such enterprises…the moment of treason–which holds the subject juridically to have transgressed structures and rules…to the moment of betrayal: an act that has as much to do with giving up something oneself as it does with dissatisfying the expectations of those around one: an act of self-excommunication.[61]

The experience of emotionally having to stand her ground with her family would come to life in eerie metaphor: culminating in the harrowing experience of taking back ownership of her RV. Joey tells me about the night she finally tracked it down.

> *That night I pulled up to the gate, and the owner said, "Well you're gonna have to wait till I get home." And I'm like, "Fine." There were some people parked in burned-out RVs, and sitting there to the right, and they pulled up behind me and trapped me, and I just sat in this van, like I have no fear, and they're thinking why is this woman not afraid of us? Cause they were going to intimidate me, and I thought, what are you going to do? And dogs are barking because they're–this is a dangerous area.*
> *[The owner] …got home, opened up the gate, and [he] thought I was going to come in and look at it and leave, and I said, "I'm spending the night." He's like, "You can't do that." And I said, "Why?" "Well, it's not safe. These people come in and steal my stuff." And I said, "Well. I don't care. I'm staying next to my RV." And I have pictures of this. I took everything out of my van threw it in the grass. And so that night I'm laying there. And sure enough, there were gunshots, and then the next morning the guy goes, "You gotta get out of here, you know–someone came and stole some stuff."*
> *[…]I had to call a tow truck and coordinate it, but I was going to rescue this baby that had my life still in it like seven years earlier, and I loved it, and I thought it was beautiful[…]So I had it towed to a motorhome place, and they said, "Junk this thing." And I said, "No. I can't. It's all I have. We're gonna make this work."*

The RV, more so than her van, represented the ticket to living this lifestyle on her terms. It embodies more than just the freedom to access life on the road–it was about doing "self" better.[62] It became the vehicle that would symbolize her transgression–and therefore–her power of will.

Not all the women I met had to transgress boundaries that confined them in familial roles. On the other end of the spectrum, Kat's daughter, for example–who was already comfortable with her mother's life on the racetrack circuit and feminist activities–didn't find her transition to full-time nomadism unusual, and even applauded it. Kat had already transgressed social norms throughout her life and wasn't defined by the gendered boundaries other women found restrictive. Iska also had a different experience, equating her prior life with being more on the fringes than how she was now living. Homeless at fifteen, she filed for emancipation to be able to remain in school and self-sign paperwork such as field trip releases. To meet the court's requirements, she had to secure a job, a place to live, and put money into savings. Noting this, the judge said he had no problem signing the declaration, "as long as she wasn't pregnant." As she matured she attempted to live within normative social expectations–she married, worked full-time as a lab technician, and took care of her grandmother after she was diagnosed with breast cancer, but she didn't feel like she ever fit. Despite her experience at the LTVA, she feels less of an outsider both as a nomad and as an older woman.

> *You know, I was trying to belong to a certain social group that was outside of the normal society, or whatever, just to feel like I belonged, since I didn't–ever felt like I belonged. You know. Especially, in high school, you know, how you have the preppies, and–whatever, the little cliques–or whatever. But I mean it seems adult life is still a lot like stupid high school. And then [laughs] since I've been living this way, I feel I've grown more into myself. And I don't need to–I don't know, like have dyed hair or whatever–like I'm trying to be a natural person and an authentic person. So, I think I look a lot more normie now and probably people, you know, people look at me and they don't think, "Oh she's, outside the norm."*

To claim membership in the rubber tramp community, however, is still an act outside of the mainstream. This is not just the opinion of the New York Times[63], but of the men and women I met. They all recognize that to "rubber tramp" is to embrace a counter-culture lifestyle. Joey talks about her first RTR, one year prior.

> *It was January 10th, and I got there the night before, and I just didn't know what to do. I was so nervous. I drove down, and I didn't know where to park, and I just pulled into this cul-de-sac and found a level spot, and backed in like, "Whew. OK." I looked around and that's when I feel like my life began. Because–I knew that I was amongst people that would talk about things that mattered: their feelings; their food; their use of utilities; their clothing; the weather; where to go. And these people were completely different. There was somebody–a stockbroker from New York. There was a couple. There was a woman with a brain injury from Texas, and none of us would have sat around a dinner table at a restaurant and had a conversation. But out there, it was like, I couldn't get enough of them.*

Some women understand their decisions to become nomads as a radical act, while others do not; it is simply required for self-preservation. Most do not consider themselves rebellious or transgressive. RV Joey, for example, while I offer her as an example, perceives what she's done as more of a personal and spiritual quest. "I'm not anti-anything. I'm not anti-government. I'm not anti-laws. I love the regulations. I love the things that protect us out here. I'm not someone trying to prove anything to anybody. In my family, I never was. They don't even know half of what I'm doing. You know, I'm not out here to prove anything. And you can tell the people that are out here to prove something. I was like, just come out here, and hang out, and see who shows up–because it's you it's going to show up."

The summer before our interview, Joey returned to Texas to "moochdock"[64] in her brother's driveway, taking advantage of electricity to run her air conditioner. Once again, she faced strong opposition when she wanted to leave after her health started to decline.

> *Last fall, when, as you noted–you watch my channel–you watched me be vibrant, and get to Texas for about a month, and then go down. [sighs] No one is really willing to help me get out of there. They just–I mean my brother flips 40 homes a month…They could have re–this RV could have been like a brand new RV in a week but they had to show me that, "No, we're not gonna–you don't–this does not exist….we're not even going to talk about it. In fact, we're just going to mock it. And you're going to laugh at all of our jokes." And I just laugh. Cause I was like–like, I'm so much more than anything my family believes about me, or anything they want to do or not do to me. I was like, "Good luck with you." I was just thinking, I'm so lucky to have a flat driveway. I'm so lucky to have this plugged in. All I could see was what I had. Not what people were trying to do or not do to me.*

Her family did end up providing assistance. One of her sisters intervened with the others saying, “This is not fair. Her life was amazing till she came to Texas and it just went downhill. We've got to help her get out of here." Each then pitched in but it still was problematic leaving. Another nomad swung by at the end of the summer. “I wasn't quite ready, but Nomadic Fanatic came through Texas, and asked if I was ready to get back home? Not quite, because no one helped me lift a thing...no one helped [expels a long breath]. Yeah, it was like escaping prison…but I never felt that way. I just was like, "I'm so lucky! I'm going!"

Soon after, RV Joey’s channel picked up, she started acquiring new fans, and she felt she was again regaining some financial independence. As the months have passed she is feeling more physically energetic (although she admits she can only go so long before she has to retreat behind the door of her RV and rest–sometimes for days). Her refrigerator and generator still don’t work. She uses solar lamps at night for light and charges things off of a dash outlet, being careful not to run down her engine battery like she did her house battery. To me, however, she glows. She tells me she may have to go back to Texas for the summer again and I think of how her family must view the fringes of rubber tramp existence. It is difficult for them to see the positive aspects of marginality. Joey finishes her thought from the earlier statement, about how she is now showing up for herself, “I’m just like, ‘you can't compete with this.’ You couldn't say, ‘Well, now, if you could go back to that, would you?’ And I say, ‘Hell no.’” Her pronouncement reminds me of what bell hooks once wrote, “I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose–to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center–but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.”[65] Of all the crossings these older women made to become nomads, deliberate transgression appeared to offer the most enthusiastically-embraced outcomes.

6. Conclusion: Reframing Aging –Potential of Disruption and Contexts of Marginality

> *It’s men who are rebellious in youth and grow more conservative with age. Women tend to be conservative in youth and grow more rebellious with age; a pattern that has been evident since abolitionist and suffragist times. This makes sense in a male-dominant society where…young women outgrow the limited power allotted to them as sex objects and child bearers.* ~Gloria Steinem[66]

Before and during my fieldwork, I thought of the fringes–whether in metaphor or as a real place–as the valve on a pressure cooker. When people, in all of their infinite variety don’t fit and therefore become “misfit,” an escape mechanism is required. Societies need these pockets of release to maintain equilibrium. Hoey offers the context of “elsewhere” as a place for identity reshaping.[67] Bruder observes the lure of movement to nomads, and the promise of what can be, just down the road. [67] Liminal spaces can be locations of transformation. Rogoff’s concept of “exhaustive geographies” parallels this idea giving us a new vocabulary to conceptualize this movement towards the fringes–these lines of flight–as trajectories of dispersal away from imposed and confining binaries.[69]

In discussing age, for example, “old” is a line with two sides. One side has value, while occupants of the other side do not. For women, devaluing is partnered with an additional sense of fading into invisibility. Akiko Bush, author of *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*, writes in an article for The Atlantic, “The invisible woman might be the actor no longer offered roles after her 40th birthday, the 50-year-old woman who can’t land a job interview, or the widow who finds her dinner invitations declining with the absence of her husband. She is the woman who finds that she is no longer the object of the male gaze—youth faded, childbearing years behind her, social value diminished.”[70] If a woman understands herself to be the object she has always been treated, Bush goes on to point out, she is acutely aware when she loses her desirability: when she goes unrecognized.

When women find the confining boundaries of objectification erased, within invisibility lies the potential to experience liberation. They have the opportunity to redefine themselves outside of social expectations. Granny Jo may have taken up life on the road as a means to experience life, but she unexpectedly finds herself reorienting her identity as it relates to the needs of others. Bush uses the example of Virginia Woolf’s invisible Mrs. Dalloway who finds herself only known by her husband’s name, but who has an instinctual affinity for knowing people. “Clarissa recognizes that our lives can be measured by what we have done to touch the lives of others; she is attuned to how human associations can be formed with complete strangers. And to the enduring value—indeed, power—of such alliances.”[71]

Headache finds herself displaced, but rather than clinging to the vestige of security within the familiar, she takes to the road as a rubber tramp. She says she is looking for control and Counts and Counts note that for the RVing seniors they studied, a desire for control of “home” was correlated to the freedom of travel. “Being able to leave when they

wish gives RVers the power to choose and allows them to control their physical and social environment."[72] Headache doesn't find the control she initially imagined, but what she does discover is agency whether she exercises that power in choice or sacrifice. In speaking of how women in later life have the potential from going to object to subject, Bush quotes New York psychologist Alison Carper, "A subject is someone who experiences her own agency, who is aware of how she can and does have an impact on others and how she is, ultimately, the author of her own life. She is aware of the responsibility this carries."

Joey was willing to transgress powerful family ties to live life as a nomad. Perhaps inseparable from the suffering engendered by her disability was the diminishment of self. She felt she didn't exist. The pain of invisibility would be the impetus driving what would be an act of self-expulsion. She didn't know what she would find on the road, but she believed that she could only find herself by losing herself in the broad canvas of "having nothing." Bush points to the 1960s model popularly known as Veruschka. She collaborated with German artist Holger Trülzsch in a series of paintings where she painted her body in colors and patterns that made it disappear in front of a similarly-designed background. "It is an image of the female body going from object to air, from material to immaterial, from thing to nothing. It is camouflage that has nothing to do with escaping prey, avoiding danger, or finding food or a mate, and everything to do with finding a coherence."[73]

Regardless of their entree, the boundaries immaterial, all of the women rubber trampers refused to let stigma, fears for personal safety, and gendered social expectations stop them. They define their own space and their relationship within it, so whether or not they recognize it, a woman choosing to rubber tramp is performing a radical act. They are redefining their identities and claiming agency–something that is often denied women in our American culture where to claim power is to be unfeminine, and subsequently, shamed and disparaged. [74]

They defy contemporary understandings of gender and aging. These women's stories are not narratives of regression, stagnation, and decline. This is a counter-culture lifestyle and these women are creative and adaptive. They live challenging lives. They continuously learn new skills and take advantage of the latest technologies. Often their health improves. Daily, they put their need for self-expression, in whatever form that takes, before security and comfort. The dual nature of youth and the clichés of aging come into question.

They also challenge a binary that is found in poverty and transiency; it is an interesting contradiction that movement embodies the concept of freedom, yet we stigmatize those that are mobile and poor, denying them moral character and subsequently, their humanity. For women, the choice to rubber tramp is a creative and radical reaction to the loss of self, brought on by our culture's traditional portrayal of aging for women, diminishment, loss of power, etc. The very act of going to the fringes, the outer boundaries, the margins, rescues them from marginality. They define their own space and their relationship within it.

Now that I am no longer a denizen of the road, I realize that the fringes can be more accurately understood as places of creative cultural reworking. The margins are not a place for misfits but space, rather, that exists for those individuals that recognize–even if it is subconscious–that a reworking of social identities and values are necessary to society as a whole. These people fit fine. It's the arbitrary boundaries of localized understandings and regionalized communities that are contracting. Like the boundaries of the conflict-torn Middle East, these lines that have been erected become limitations that only exist to serve themselves. They are markers of territories that no longer delineate meaningful identifications.

The rubber tramp lives on the fringes: the fringes of inhabitable space, the fringes of highways, the fringes of social acceptance. They live a life of mobility and in the state of near-perpetual motion, despite its inevitable exhaustion. For them, it is more desirable than the alternative: a life of confinement and stagnation. Movement has always been about freedom in the uniquely American road narrative, and the rubber tramp movement is no exception. Some women embrace the contradictions and are remaining within its borders as permanent citizens. Others reside temporarily, finding new identifications of self–new understandings–that they then take back into mainstream society.

> *...as historian Gerda Lerner has pointed out, it is a shared characteristic of women's history—or the real history of any marginalized group—to be lost and discovered, lost again and re-discovered, re-lost and re-re-discovered, until the margins have transformed the center. As in a tree or a seed, the margins are where the growth is.* ~ Gloria Steinem [75]

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54 A popular YouTuber with TBI promotes her life on the road through a series of lifestyle videos.

55 Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways*, 37.

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59 multilevel marketing

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