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Article abstract

This article explores the tension between women's efforts to find time for themselves and traditional culture's strong directives against women spending any time alone. Drawing on twenty-one contemporary legends from the Snopes website (http://www.snopes.com) that feature solitary female protagonists, it argues that the narratives demonstrate a gendered contestation of public space. Set in cars, hotels, shopping malls and in cyberspace, locations that sociologist Marc Augé (1995) describes as "non-places," these legends warn of the dangers that await women if they venture into the world alone. In addressing the question of where women belong, the texts speak of female challenges to male domination of public spaces at the same time they reveal powerful male defenses.

ON THEIR OWN
Contemporay Legends of Women Alone in the Urban Landscape

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Alone

Like many women, I don't get to spend much time alone. Work and family commitments usually more than fill my days. Perhaps I should take pride in my abilities to multitask or what sociologists would describe as my polychronic use of time (Hall 1983), but I sometimes long for a few hours by myself when no one wants anything. I know I'm not alone in my desire. Within my circle of family and friends I have watched many other women struggle to find time for themselves amidst the competing demands of career and family. And I have also seen the flip side: women who have had to teach themselves how to be alone when suddenly, often at middle age, they are by themselves for the first time in their lives because of a dissolved partnership or the departure of grown children. *Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wente picked up on women's longing for solitude in her 2003 Mother's Day opinion piece, entitled "Flight is a Motherhood Issue." Wente's column was sparked by recent media coverage of Dar Heatherington, an Alberta alderwoman who phoned home at the end of her Montana business trip to tell her husband she'd be late getting home and then disappeared for three days. When police eventually found Heatherington at the Treasure Island Hotel in Las Vegas (apparently it never occurred to her that her disappearance would prompt a giant investigation complete with helicopter search and extensive media coverage), she first claimed to have been drugged and abducted and when that story didn't fly, said she had met a man while out on a bike ride and gone off with him. Later Heatherington was charged and then found guilty of misleading the police. She was sentenced to eight months house arrest, followed

by a year-long strict curfew (Walton 2004: A1). However, at the time of Wente's column in May 2003, events were still murky. Wente posed the question that implicitly fueled most of the coverage of this case to that point: "What kind of woman would abandon a doting husband and three adorable children, a high-profile job, and an upstanding reputation, for a lost weekend in Las Vegas? What kind of woman would get on a mountain bike and pedal off on an adventure that's bound to end in trouble?" (A19). Some male readers might have found Wente's answer to this question unexpected. She wrote, "Husbands and children, do not read the rest of this, for you will not be reassured. The answer is: pretty well all of us, at some time or another at least in our dreams." After reviewing some of the details of the Heatherington case and reflecting on other women she knew who had considered fleeing their families, Wente concluded, "Fortunately for society, mothers very seldom run away for real. The friend [of mine] who planned to elope with her soulmate never did, and the one who was going to move to Greece is still here. Their kids will shower them with flowers, cards and kisses [for Mother's Day]. And mothers will be grateful and the kids none the wiser" (A19). Wente's observations are not startling, of course. Women's yearning for time alone is not recent. An article published in the 1930s in the Canadian women's magazine, *Chatelaine*, entitled, "A Chance to be Alone! It's a Great Need in the Majority of Homes These Days," identified lack of privacy, especially for women, as a significant failing of modern architecture. In the pages that follow, I reflect on an issue at the core of that 1930's article: the tension between women's efforts to find time for themselves and traditional culture's strong directives against women spending any time alone. Here, however, my texts are not houses but contemporary legends. In an attempt to build on Mary Seelhorst's 1987 examination of contemporary legends about women alone in danger, I explore narratives where a woman acts by herself. The Snopes website (http://www.snopes.com) served as my source, providing me with twenty-one examples of legends with solitary female characters at their centre that are currently in circulation, or at least up for discussion.[1] Some narratives emphasize the woman being physically alone. Others stress the emotional; she is detached from a partner or family. But each story has a lone woman at its centre. The

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1.   This article is based on an earlier paper presented to the International Society for the Study of Contemporary Legend, 2003. The corpus of legends it draws on were posted on http://www.snopes.com in June 2003.

geographical locations of these legends suggest that female solitariness is a transient state for women for the legends' characters are on the move: leaving home, in or on the way to cars; in shopping malls; in hotels; or engaged in virtual travel on the Internet. In some legends women act with agency; more often they are victims. However, underlying all the narratives is a gendered contestation of public space. As feminist geographer Linda McDowell writes, "Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial; they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience" (McDowell 1999: 4). The contemporary legends considered here pose the question of where women belong. In response to this question, they tell of female challenges to male domination of public spaces but they also speak of powerful male defenses.

Neither Here nor There

Leaving Home

Three of the legends on the Snopes web site depict women forced from their homes. Two of these offer clues to the answer to the central question of why women find themselves alone. The first describes the tactics of a serial killer in the Baton Rouge area of Louisiana who lures women out of their homes with a recording of a crying baby (Snopes: "Baton Rouge Serial Killer"). A woman hears a baby crying late at night outside her home. When she contacts the police, they tell her *not* to open her door under any circumstances. According to the officer, a serial killer in the area is preying on women who are alone at night, tricking them into leaving their homes by playing a recording of a baby crying. The second, an updated version of the now classic legend, "The Surprise Party," relates how a man decides to throw a surprise party for his fiancé. As her group of friends wait in the darkness to spring the party, they catch her offering herself to her dog with peanut butter smeared on her nipples and crotch. Her fiancé calls the wedding off and one version ends, "…afterwards the house had a 'For Sale' sign in front" (Snopes: "The Lap Dog"). The final narrative is also familiar: a woman responds to being forced from her home when her partner takes up with a younger woman. Before her departure the jilted woman sews shrimp into the curtain hems and the impossible-to-locate stench

eventually drives the new couple to sell the house (Snopes: "A Woman's Plaice").

Like other examples discussed in this article, these first three legends reinforce cultural constructions of "natural" and "unnatural" female behavior. In the first, a woman is victimized by a killer whose success depends on maternal instinct being so strong that women will rush from the safety of their homes to protect a baby in distress. Rushing from the safety of their homes turns out to be a deadly mistake. In the next text, a woman's violation of the cultural taboo against bestiality results in the termination of her relationship and the dissolution of her home. Because of her unnatural act, this woman finds herself alone. The final legend also underscores the seriousness of the solitary state for women. The crime against the protagonist — that she is forced from her home — is so hideous that her actions against her ex-partner and his new girlfriend are presented as humorously justified. The girlfriend is a deserving victim.

Gender constructions of what is "naturally" male or female have spatial dimensions, as McDowell notes: "This binary division is also deeply implicated in the social production of space, in assumptions about the 'natural' and built environments and in the sets of regulations which influence who should occupy which spaces and who should be excluded" (McDowell 1999: 11). In their exploration of natural and unnatural female behaviour, contemporary legends firmly root women in the domestic sphere with their assertion that notwithstanding the realities of postmodern life, women's natural place is still in the home. Away from the home's safety, women are in danger.

By Car

That nine of the legends feature lone women and cars is perhaps not unusual given what we know about contemporary legend's tendency to cluster around technology and the genre's preoccupation with the automobile itself. Again, in keeping with common understandings of contemporary legend as reflective of our dis-ease with elements of modern life, women express agency in only two of these narratives. In a version of the now classic "The $50.00 Porsche," a woman is left instructions by her husband to sell his car and send him the proceeds after he runs off with a younger woman. She then sells his late model Porsche for $50.00 (Snopes: "The $50.00 Porsche"). In another an older woman draws a gun on four African American men she finds in

her car and forces them out... only to discover that she has made a mistake and it is not her car after all (Snopes: "Gun-Toting Grannies"). Of the seven narratives where women are victimized, three take place in a car. In the first a woman is tricked by a criminal masquerading as a police officer (Snopes: "The Knockoff Pullover"); in the second a woman falsely claims to have been tricked by a criminal masquerading as a police officer (Snopes: "Highway Deception"). I suspect that the third is one of the most widely circulated legends among women: the now very familiar (and well studied) story of a woman who is warned by a garage station attendant or a motorist traveling behind her that unbeknownst to her there is a serial killer crouched in her backseat waiting to attack (Snopes: "The Killer in the Backseat"). In three other narratives a woman is victimized as she approaches her car. Men hide underneath and slash her ankles with a razor before raping and/or murdering her (Snopes: "The Unkindest Cut"); an old lady begging a ride in a parking lot turns out to be a crazed killer in disguise (Snopes: "Shopping Mauled"), and one legend, focused on a south Louisiana serial killer, has him luring women to their deaths with a $5 dollar bill he pretends they have dropped in the parking lot (Snopes: "Baton Rouge Serial Killer"). A final legend of victimization concerning cars warns women not to leave their house key with their car mechanic. Mechanics, it turns out, often copy house keys so that they can break in later to rape and murder their customers (Snopes: "Key Factor"). Together narratives reveal a distrust of the machine that has transformed life in North America over the last few generations. The car has brought new concepts and language to the realms of production, revolutionalized patterns of work, leisure and residence, and generated a plethora of changing signs and symbols in all areas of life from the sidewalk to the cinema (Thoms et al. 1998: 1). Contemporary legends that place women in cars not only express our love/hate relationship with the automobile (see Lockwood 1998),[2] they challenge the presence of women in what

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2. Estimating that approximately 70% of all the energy put out by humans goes into the making, sustaining and fueling of cars, Sebastian Lockwood argues that our love of driving erases the past and consumes the future (1998: 52). He worries that we have become accustomed to a "savage servility" that has sacrificed natural places to sterile highways and parking lots (53). Lockwood writes: "It is no wonder that as we put our conscious mind on hold when driving — deny the miraculous element of the landscape appearing and disappearing at seventy miles an hour — that our unconscious mind has a great deal of

has been a male space of technology and consumption. A "potent symbol of masculinity" (Thoms et al. 1998: 1), the automobile has been less closely linked to female identity. In popular culture, for example, women have been more often associated with the back seat than the front with connotations of women and sex in cars rather than of women as powerful car drivers/owners. Legends that identify the car as a dangerous location for women effectively exert restraint over them, attempting to regulate both female sexuality, as is the case in many contemporary legends[3], and women's mobility. These legends censure women's autonomy as sole drivers of the car, challenging their efforts to take control. Significantly, narratives of women victimized in their cars may be particularly powerful precisely because they speak to an area where some women fear taking control: driving.[4]

In and Out of the Mall

Six legends that connect women to cars also characterize them as consumers. While locations can change from one version to the next, in the narratives on the Snopes site, four occur as a woman leaves the shopping mall; another takes place at a garage, and the sixth at a gas station. Of the two that locate women within malls, one describes a man who approaches lone women and asks if they like pizza. When a woman responds positively, the man offers her $100.00 to shoot a pizza

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unloading to do… We are aware of the psychic bomb we have released in our minds — but we are too within it, in love with it, driven by it… to truly come to terms with it. Ultimately it will be the future generations — who really suffer the consequences of the internal combustion engine — who will have to deal with it. When all of this is gone to rust they will look back and say: how could you have infected us so? How could you bow so low to that savage servility?" (53-55).
3.   See for example, "The Hook" and "The Roommate's Death" (Snopes).
4.   Approximately twice as many woman as men suffer from generalized panic disorders (see Wittchen et al. 1994). Some of these anxiety disorders are attached to driving and cross-culturally women seem to suffer more anxiety around driving than do men. For example, in an American study, thirty-nine women and only nine men responded to researchers' newspaper article and expressed a fear of driving (Matthew et al. 1982). A Portuguese study found women experienced greater anxiety when taking a driving test than men did (Carlos and Paulo 2000).

commercial but asks her to go out of the mall where the light is better. Once she leaves the shopping mall, she is assaulted and abducted (Snopes: "Mall Grab"). The final narrative describes thieves who work shopping malls by hiding in a toilet stall and robbing lone women who enter the washroom (Snopes: "Loo Looters"). They ensure their escape by demanding that the victim remove her clothing. By the time she gathers up the nerve to walk out into the mall naked, they have fled. Rachael Bowlby begins her analysis of shopping with the categorical statement: "Women shop" (Bowlby 1987). This popular image of the shopper as female dates to the end of the nineteenth century when there was a rapid expansion of what counted as respectable, or at least acceptable public space for women in the form of galleries, libraries, restaurants, tearooms, hotels and department stores (Nava 1996: 43). Male workers were largely confined to their places of employment while women increasingly moved into the realm of consumption. Theorists have argued convincingly that shopping, or provisioning for the family, which operates on the principle of relationality, therefore became an extension of women's work (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). It is a construction that continues today. For example, Janice Williamson in her analysis of the West Edmonton Mall notes that for many women shoppers the categories of shopping and mothering overlap, and mothers often entertain their children by taking them shopping at the mall.

In questioning the notion that women are natural shoppers, Bowlby links shopping with the ideological assumption that women mother naturally.

> Shopping and mothering are both, in a certain sense, part of women's "reproductive" roles, but the definitions of women's nature implied by the assignment of each as a "naturally" feminine task are in fact not the same. Motherhood is associated with self-denial and deferral to others' needs. Shopping, while in one way regarded as an indispensable task, is also regarded as a field for the exercise of self-indulgent pleasures which are nonetheless taken to be "feminine" in the same way as are different, responsible qualities attributed to the mother (Bowlby 1987: 186-187).

From the turn of the twentieth century the fact that women went shopping unsupervised and that their shopping excursions potentially offered them freedom and pleasures has not gone unnoticed (Nava 1996). In his analysis of contemporary shopping, John Fiske demonstrates

how work and leisure can still come together for women shoppers. He bases part of his discussion on slogans he encounters for sale. These sayings mock masculine power and transfer it to female practice so that success in shopping becomes as much a source of power as success in sport, business or war. For example, a bumper sticker, proclaims: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping"; a birthday card announces: "Happy Birthday to a guy who's sensitive, intelligent and fun to be with — if you liked to shop you'd be perfect"; and a card designed for no specific occasion with a stylized woman on the cover reads: "Work to Live; Live to Love; and Love to Shop" (Fiske 1989: 18). Fiske draws on these slogans to argue that as a female practice, shopping can be constructed as "an oppositional, competitive act, and as such a source of achievement, self-esteem and power" (19). A fourth example, "A Woman's Place is in the Mall," contrasts mall and home, and thus constructs the mall's public space as a site of oppositional, liberational meanings in comparison to the home's domestic sphere which has been a location of subordination for women (19-20).

Clearly the lone women of contemporary legend are of the self indulgent variety of shopper. If they are mothers, they have left their children somewhere else. Presumably setting their mothering aside, they venture to the mall on their own. Some versions of the legends on the Snopes site are very clear in their effort to curb such self-indulgence, reflecting the cultural dis-ease with female shoppers that Mica Nava (1996) noted was present at the turn of the century. For example, one variant of the story, where an old lady begging a ride at a shopping mall turns out to be a crazed killer in disguise, ends: "PLEASE send this to all your email buddies, male or female. Females, beware!!! Males, go shopping with your wives, girlfriends, or whatever when they ask!!!" (Snopes: "Shopping Mauled"). This warning may be a female ploy to pressure men into taking more/some responsibility for holiday shopping since the narrative indicates that "Christmas shopping nights are just ahead." However, if the legend succeeds in prompting uncooperative partners and/or children to accompany women, their resistance ("Aren't you done yet?," "You don't need that" or "Haven't you spent enough already?") would make the work of shopping more difficult, adding to the already heavy responsibilities many women shoulder for the reproduction of their family's holiday celebrations (see Bella 1992), and destroying any potentially liberating or pleasurable aspects of the experience.

At the Hotel

Women are consumers in two other legends on the Snopes website. In these narratives women are victimized in hotels. According to the Snopes site, the first is a legend whose history may reach back to the nineteenth century and has cinematic links. As Snopes describes it, "A woman is taken ill while traveling in a foreign country with her daughter. While the mother lies in her hotel bed, the daughter makes a trip across town to pick up a needed prescription. When she returns, she finds that her mother has disappeared without a trace, their hotel room does not exist, and no one remembers having seen either her or her mother" (Snopes: "The Vanishing Hotel Room"). In the second a woman traveling on business almost becomes a crime statistic because she fills out a room service menu. The room service request, which she hangs on her door containing her name, is taken by a man who later masquerading as her husband picks up her room key from the hotel desk and attempts to enter her room (Snopes: "Menu Shouldn't Trust"). Like the legends linking women to cars and shopping malls, these narratives of women in hotels challenge their economic power. Significantly, perhaps even shockingly, a literature search on the data base, *Sociological Abstracts*, using "women and hotels" produced fifteen citations, none of which discusses women travelers or women executives. Rather, these studies focus on hotels as work sites for prostitutes and hotel cleaners, and highlight the inadequacies of rundown hotels as housing for elderly women living in large inner cities. The legends here question women's legitimate claim to the public space of the hotel, asserting that women have no business there except as workers. Importantly, they attempt to shake women's confidence in public spaces that are usually culturally constructed as being safer for women than downtown city streets, for example. Cars, malls and hotels ought to be safe places for woman yet the legends argue they are not.

Lost in Cyberspace

The final five legends on Snopes about lone women characters focus on the Internet. Four of these narratives position women as victims; in the fifth the female protagonist acts vengefully. The first legend that warns women of someone who calls himself "slavemaster" luring women to their deaths over the Internet, is rooted in the actions of John Edward Robinson who was arrested in June 2000 and charged with sexual assault

of two women in the Kansas City area whom he had contacted over the Internet using the name slavemaster (Snopes: "Slavemaster"). Robinson, eventually convicted of these assaults plus the murders of six women, is now in custody. However, the story that continues to circulate widely by email still has him in active pursuit of women and usually inflates the number of his victims; the version I saw was fifty-six. The second legend warns of a website: www.coincidencedesign.com that offers a stalking service, where men can arrange to "accidentally" meet the girl of their dreams by having her habits researched so they will know where to run into her and then what to say (Snopes: "Design Flaw"). Although the website itself is very convincing, it is a hoax. When author David Cassell checked it out, the domain name's postal address was in Texas and the phone number belonged to a car dealership in California. The third item on the Snopes site is a warning about a woman who was stalked by an online acquaintance and recommends using the "blind carbon copy" feature in email to prevent this from happening to you (Snopes: "I B-C-C YOU"). In the final example, a woman exercises agency as she gets back at a man she met out dancing and gave her email address to. When he asked her out by email, she responded with a few questions, such as what was his last name. His reply was a brush off; he didn't have time for questions. In an act of revenge, she circulated his email far and wide (Snopes: "The Bryan Winter of our Discontent"). These legends hint at gendered differences explored within recent investigations of Internet use. In general, men spend more time online and rely on it for a wider range of activities than women (Jericek 2001). While some studies indicate that women use email more than men, they make less use of the Web (Jackson et al. 2001). For example, an Australian study found that women generally see the Internet as a tool for activities rather than as play or a technology to be mastered as male subjects did (Singh 2001). Furthermore, women report more computer anxiety and less computer competency than men (Jericek 2001). Just as in the legends mentioned above that relate to women's economic power, some authors understand this gender gap on the Internet as a product of socioeconomic differences between men and women (Bimber 2000). For example, in their analysis of representations of Filipino women on the Internet, Chris Cunneen and Julie Stubbs emphasize the significance of the Internet as a marketplace for buying and selling women. Here Filipino women are presented as partners for sex or marriage, prompting these authors to conclude that "the Internet also exemplifies the manner in which economic privilege and access to

technological knowledge and recourse reinforce hierarchies based in 'race' and gender, and reproduce inequality within and through cyberspace" (Cunneen and Stubbs 2000: abstract). Perhaps not surprising in light of this, Jodi Dean identifies women's fear of vulnerability as a factor inhibiting them from making fuller use of the Internet (Dean 1999). The recreation of "an old boys network" in the Internet community (Gamba and Kleiner 2001) is of particular concern for women given the current estimate that forty-four percent of all United States jobs by 2006 will be in the production or use of information technology products and services (Newton 2001).

The Dangers of Being a Non-person in a Non-place

None of this is surprising. It is not surprising that, as is so often the case in contemporary legends generally, women are victims in these narratives much more frequently than they are agents. Neither is it surprising that in their construction of cars, hotels, malls, and the Internet as male space, the legends punish women for their attempts to enter it. As Judith Williamson notes, "one of the most important aspects of images of 'femininity' in mass culture is not what they reveal but what they conceal. If 'woman' means home, love, and sex, what 'woman' doesn't mean, in general currency, is work, class and politics" (Williamson 1986: 103). Thus, while the multivocality of the legends allows them to speak of women's vulnerability, they also punish women for the threat they are seen to pose to society (see Busby 1994: 44). Supporting the conclusions of Cylin Busby in her 1994 examination of women in contemporary legends, examples here reveal societal anxiety and tension around women's changing roles, so that the lone women presented in these narratives are penalized for exerting independence by a male power staggering in its brutality. Rarely are the women in these legends just robbed; it is not enough that they be stripped financially; the legends argue women's economic influence is fragile anyway. In the narratives women are almost always sexually assaulted and often murdered in a forceful perpetuation of cultural images of women as consumers/consumed, rather than producers/creators. In addition, one of the strongest messages for women underscores the futility of female agency in the face of such male power. The few narratives that do take up female agency depict it as a joke; we laugh at the older woman's attempts to defend herself when she mistakenly believes an innocent group of

young men are sitting in her car. Women try to invade male space but
when they do, they cannot win.

Locations at the centre of this group of contemporary legends, cars,
shopping malls, hotels, and the Internet are a particular type of public
space that Marc Augé has described as a product of supermodernity:
the non-place. Augé argues that these non-places where increasingly
we spend our time — in airports, parking garages, at bank machines, in
cars driving along the highway — are not what anthropologists have
conceptualized as place in that they are not defined as relational,
historical, nor are they concerned with identity (Augé 1995: 77-78).
Rather, non-places are characterized by solitary individuality and
experienced as the fleeting, the temporary and the ephemeral (78).[5]
Hypothetically these non-places should be liberating for women in that
gendered attributes and perhaps even our sexed bodies should become
unimportant (see McDowell 1999: 6).[6] However, I would argue many
women experience non-places as male spaces for, as Augé contends,
individuals are linked to non-places through the mediation of words or
texts that are essentially masculine (Augé 1995: 94-96). He writes that
"… the ego-ideal they project is masculine; at present, a credible
businesswoman or woman driver is perceived as possessing 'masculine'
qualities" (105). While Augé is thinking here about how ads and signs
link an individual to a non-place, the contemporary legends contained
in this article offer their own textual mediations and reaffirm the
masculine identification of the non-place. Like the posted signs Augé
refers to, legends remind women of the maleness of non-places,
highlighting the risk to their personal safety if they dare to enter alone
and putting women in a bind because by definition non-places require
solitary individuality. And, while places become spaces when people
frequent them (83), in a non-place a woman is a non-person; she is
unable to exert a powerful enough presence to transform non-place
into space. The legends clearly show that being a non-person in a non-

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5.   Interestingly, there are attempts to transform non-places into places. For example,
     an "insider's guide" to six major airports appeared in the May 2005 issue of Air
     Canada's inflight magazine, *En Route*. The article highlights food bars, shopping,
     design and hotels.
6.   Augé writes that "Alone, but one of many, the user of a non-place is in contractual
     relations with it (or with the powers that govern it) (Augé 1995: 101)… a
     person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He
     becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger,
     customer or driver" (103).

place holds serious implications for women, especially given Augé's warning that "in the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together. The possibility of non-place is never absent from any place" (107). Although the narrative thrust of the contemporary legends examined here is to confine women to their homes and domestic roles, it is an impossible goal for many reasons, not the least of which is because, as Augé argues, in the world of supermodernity people are always and never at home (109; see also Oh and Arditi 2000). Furthermore, despite popular culture discourses like that supported by these contemporary legends, women have not been confined to private spaces for a long time, if they ever were. Nava (1996) points out that women have been a central force in modernizing society since at least the turn of the twentieth century. When women emerged as shoppers, to some extent they stepped out of male-defined and male-controlled discourses. Rather than being confined exclusively to the domestic sphere, they were pivotal to the making of modernity (67). From the outset, women's work as shoppers required (as it still does) substantial levels of skill and expertise in social interaction with strangers (Oh and Arditi 2000: 73).

This is not to suggest that women are completely safe when they travel alone, but the contemporary legends presented in this article work to increase women's anxieties (see Wachs 1988), stirring their vulnerabilities by challenging some of the very things women tell themselves in order to feel safer. From the late nineteenth century stores were marketed to women shoppers as safe places (Bowlby 1987; Nava 1996) and the success of the modern shopping mall is in part due to the fact that the space is designed to facilitate women's shopping practices without the stigma or threat of the street (Farrier 1987: 1, quoted in Fiske 1989: 22-23). The legends attempt to rob women of their sense of well-being in some of the few public spaces in which they may feel safe, such as the car, shopping mall, and hotel. At the same time the legends also effectively distract from the well-known but also well ignored fact that it is not when women are out in the world that they are most in danger of sexual or physical assault but when they are in their own homes.[7] Furthermore they advise women that reaching out to others via the Internet may not be a safe option either.

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7. For a folkloristic analysis of women's narratives of domestic violence, see Lawless (2001).

While the legends express women's vulnerabilities they also speak of male fears, introducing the possibility that the narrative core of this collection may not be as much about the dangers faced by women alone as the dangers of lone women. Linda McDowell argues that not withstanding the "significant literature about the ways in which women experience fear and anxiety, as well as physical danger, harassment and attack in streets and open spaces... paradoxically, the public spaces of the city have been significant locations in women's escape from male dominance and from the bourgeois norms of modern society" (McDowell 1999: 148-149). There are, of course, good reasons why feminist psychologist Nancy Chodorow wrote nearly three decades ago, "what is... often hidden, in generalizations about the family as an emotional refuge, is that in the family as it is currently constituted no one supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally" (Chodorow 1978: 36). Our western patriarchal culture does not encourage women to put their emotional needs ahead of others in part because capitalism has depended heavily on women's physical and emotional preparation of the worker. Perhaps it is enough to say that through their ongoing defense of public space as male space, the contemporary legends discussed here indicate that the notion of female autonomy still raises unthinkable questions for patriarchy. What happens if women successfully take over what has been male space? What if more women, like the Albertan alderwoman Dar Heatherington referred to at the beginning of this article, run off alone, leaving their families and homes behind? And, more unthinkable yet: what if they like it?

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