

**THE PARADOX OF DOMESTICITY: RESISTANCE TO THE MYTH OF
HOME IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FILM**

A Dissertation

by

KIMBERLY O'DELL COX

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2011

Major Subject: English

The Paradox of Domesticity: Resistance to the Myth of Home in Contemporary

American Literature and Film

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ABSTRACT

The Paradox of Domesticity: Resistance to the Myth of Home in Contemporary
American Literature and Film. (May 2011)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Sally Robinson

This dissertation focuses on novels and films produced in the second half of the twentieth century that critique traditional notions of home in contemporary America to expand on the large body of work on American domesticity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These texts demonstrate the damaging power and overwhelming force of conventional domesticity, complicating traditional notions of home by speaking from positions of marginality. In each text, key figures react to limited ideologies of domesticity that seek to maintain sameness, silence, and servitude by enacting embodied resistance to domestic entrapment. The areas of convergence between the figure of the conventional, middle-class home, and the material and psychic reality of home disavow the expectations of the middle-class home ideal and offer real resistance to narrow, and often damaging, visions of home. These spaces allow for new conceptions of home and suggest that it may be possible to conceive of home as something other than fixed in place, governed by family and community, or created by prolific consumption of goods. In this way, this dissertation intervenes in the established binary of home/stability in opposition to mobility/freedom,

which maintains the limits of appropriate ways of establishing and enacting domesticity along gender and class lines.

By considering portraits of domesticity that are often left out of discussions of home in the United States my research intersects with a broad range of theoretical fields and discourses about mobility, historical and popular culture representations of the tramp, the body and surveillance, the home as spatial construct, and housekeeping as both oppressive and subversive. Drawing on historical and theoretical examinations of women within the home space, coupled with literary criticism and close-readings, I seek to determine the nature of confining domesticity and examine the varied ways that different groups of people respond to their entrapment. At stake in this dissertation is a deeper understanding of the ways that literary and filmic representations of home at the end of the twentieth century suggest a conflict between the ways that home and houses, are popularly represented and the fact that home remains a contested and dangerous space.

DEDICATION

To Michael, with whom I am always at home.

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As with any endeavor of this sort, this dissertation was supported by many without whom it never would have reached the page. I would first like to thank my parents, who instilled in me the power and value of well-honed, carefully chosen, and thoughtfully constructed language. Your faith in me, and in education for its own sake, saw me through many moments when the road seemed long and the end-goal hazy. I thank you too for all of the books you introduced me to, from *Charlotte's Web* to *The Shining*, and for letting me spend long, lovely days with my nose in a book. I thank Erin, Evan, and Andy, my cheering squad, for your single-minded belief that I could do this.

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Without Nicole McDaniel-Carder and her well-timed suggestion that I read one little book, there might not be a dissertation at all. Whether or not she knew it at the time, that one book became the impetus for a reflection on home that I continue to this day. But her impact on this dissertation, and on my life at Texas A&M, goes well beyond reading advice. Nicole, for as long as I have known you, you have believed in my abilities and validated my choices as both a scholar and a teacher. Your impressive intellect and dedication to your work are an inspiration to me. Both of our lives have changed so much since in the past six years, and I am honored to have made those changes with you and to count you as my dearest friend.

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Five years ago, I saw a man standing in the rain, waiting for a bus, and I drove right by. Luckily, when I saw him again, this time sitting across from me in a literature class, he held only a small grudge at being left in the storm. Michael, even with all the outside help I have had with this dissertation, I can't imagine how I would have done it without you. You have been there every step of the way, offering your support in all of the small ways that I sometimes take for granted. Thank you for dishes, grocery shopping, and dinner, for your confidence, high standards, and gentle pressure. Thank you, too, for disagreeing with me and forcing me to clarify my thinking and to consider ideas and texts I might have otherwise neglected. Without you, I would certainly have succumbed to the difficulties of the past year. I look forward to returning the favor. I am so grateful for your patience and your presence, and feel so lucky that we get to take this journey together. I love you so.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF HOME

Straight out from the windows Rabbit can look in the opposite direction across the town into the wide farm valley, with its golf course. He thinks, *My valley. My home.* The blemished green-papered walls, the scatter rugs whose corners keep turning under, the closet whose door bumps the television set, unknown to his senses for months, have returned with unexpected force. Every corner locks against a remembered corner in his mind; every crevice, every irregularity in the paint clicks against a nick already in his brain.

— John Updike, *Rabbit Run*

We learned, from listening, that all the strangers could see from outside, when they looked at all, was a great ruined structure overgrown with vines, barely recognizable as a house. It was the point halfway between the village and the highway, the middle spot on the path, and no one ever saw our eyes looking out through the vines.

— Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

In “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space” Mary Douglas attempts to define home as a flexible, contestable entity that is, nonetheless, a tangible thing that occupies real space. She argues that,

Home is ‘here,’ or it is ‘not here.’ The question is not ‘How?’ nor ‘Who?’

nor ‘When?’ but ‘Where is your home?’ It is always a localizable idea.

Home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed space. It does not need bricks and mortar, it can be a wagon, a caravan, a boat, or a tent.

It need not be a large space, but space there must be, for home starts by bringing some space under control. (289)

By suggesting that home is something that can “always” be situated, located, ordered, Douglas manages to regulate and reduce the very idea of home by bringing it “under control.” Despite her willingness to consider alternative home spaces—wagons, caravans, tents—as “real” homes she goes on to stipulate that for a space to be a home, it must maintain a sense of routine or sameness from day to day. She argues that “For a home neither the space nor its appurtenances have to be fixed, but there has to be something regular about the appearance and reappearance of its furnishings” (289). In other words, while an individual might move about, never spending two nights in the same place, the act of pitching the same tent or unpacking the same cooking utensils creates a stable, if moveable, home. On the contrary, even if a person sleeps surrounded by firm walls and on a clean, comfortable bed this does not qualify as home creation if the walls and bed are those of a hotel. As the epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter suggest, Douglas’ account of a fit and healthy home as an ordered home is a resonant one. The domestic spaces described by Updike and Jackson are indicative of the ways that disordered domestic space is viewed as unwholesome and peculiar. Neither of these spaces lives up to Douglas’ characterization of home, and each strikes those who view it as contemptuous. In *Rabbit Run*, Rabbit reports on his space from the inside and deems it inferior, a space from which he must flee. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* suggests a different relationship with domestic space. In *Castle*, the two inhabitants, Constance and Merricat, describe their house, but their description is based on what *others* say about it, what they have learned from listening to the strangers who come to stare. Like Rabbit’s space, the house in *Castle* is described by those who stand inside it,

but it is those who watch from the outside who consider it a “ruined structure” that is “barely recognizable as a house” (146). On the contrary, Constance and Merricat look out through the vines and are content within their crumbling house, and make of it a comfortable and secure home. Their very ability to do so makes them even stranger and they take on a kind of mythic, ghostly status in the eyes of the town. Unlike Rabbit, who is unable to seize any power by reordering his space, Constance and Merricat eschew the town’s demands on their way of life and find strength in doing so. It seems, then, that Douglas’ conception of home, as a space that must be maintained in order to be sheltering and meaningful, might logically be expanded to include the maintenance and ordering of those who dwell within it. Indeed, despite the fact that the United States, and the rest of the world as well, has become increasingly mobile in the past fifty years, main-stream representations of home reject mobility, transience, or even fluid conceptions of home space in favor of Douglas’ fixed description. Moreover, as this dissertation will show, such inflexible understandings of home demand equally rigid regulations of human behavior.

As its central focus, this dissertation offers an examination of home in contemporary literature and film. But the very concept of home, as is already clear from the passages above, is a contested one, referring at various moments to structures, family, community, the maintenance of space through housework, an ideology, and an idea. Studies of home consider all of these facets and approach home through the lenses of class, place, gender, labor, race, and architecture. Janet Zandy begins her anthology of

working-class women's writing by articulating some of what home means to her and to the women whose stories she has collected:

Home is a good place to begin. Whether it is a tenement, a barrio, a ghetto, a neighborhood, the project, the block, the stoop, the backyard, the tenant farm, the corner, four walls, or hallowed ground, finding a place in the world where one can be *at home* is crucial. Home is literal: a place where you struggle together to survive; or a dream: 'a real home,' something just out of one's grasp; or a nightmare: a place to escape in order to survive as an individual. Home is an idea: an inner geography where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of 'otherness,' where there is, at last, a community (1).

Zandy's view of home suggests that some spaces are more likely than others to be defined as homes, and that home, particularly for working class women, is a fluctuating space, one whose maintenance requires emotional and physical work. Home is an unwieldy concept, one that I attempt merely to manage in this dissertation. Throughout the dissertation, I approach home from many directions, and make fruitful and surprising discoveries in their merging.

This dissertation focuses on novels and films produced in the U.S. since 1980 that critique traditional notions of home in contemporary America in order to expand on the large body of work on American domesticity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Texts such as Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt*,

Maine demonstrate the damaging power and overwhelming force of conventional domesticity, complicating traditional notions of home by speaking from positions of marginality. In each text, key figures react to limited ideologies of domesticity that seek to maintain sameness, silence, and servitude by enacting embodied resistance to domestic entrapment or by attempting to mobilize both their homes and their bodies. These texts problematize traditional domesticity by featuring unconventional and imperfect home-spaces, often in the form of temporary housing, condemned buildings, and makeshift, roadside housing. The areas of convergence between the idea of the conventional, middle-class home—a home that many of the characters simultaneously despise and desire—and the material and psychic reality of home, are fraught with struggle as well as opportunity. The disavowal of the expectations of the middle-class home ideal offers real resistance to narrow, and often damaging, visions of home.

By considering portraits of domesticity that are often left out of discussions of home in the United States, including working-class, and black domesticities, my research intersects with a broad range of theoretical fields and discourses about mobility, historical and popular culture representations of the tramp, the body and surveillance, the home as spatial construct, and housekeeping as both oppressive and subversive. Drawing on historical and theoretical examinations of women within the home space, coupled with literary criticism and close readings, I seek to determine the nature of confining domesticity—who, or what is responsible—and examine the varied ways that different groups of people respond to their entrapment. At stake in this dissertation is a deeper understanding of the ways that literary and filmic representations of home at the end of

the twentieth century suggest a conflict between the ways that home and houses are popularly represented and the fact that home remains a contested and dangerous space for both men and women. These spaces allow for new conceptions of home and suggest that it may be possible to conceive of home as something other than fixed in place, governed by family and community, or created by prolific consumption of goods. In this way, this dissertation intervenes in the established binary of home/stability in opposition to mobility/freedom, which maintains the limits of appropriate ways of establishing and enacting domesticity along gender and class lines.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine the ways that bodies, primarily female ones, reflect the suffering, stigmatization, immobilization, surveillance, movement, reorganization, and protest to which their home situations expose and drive them. In this focus, I draw on Sidonie Smith's conception of the body as the "most material site of potential homelessness" (267). In "Identity's Body," Smith notes the way that bodies "seem to position us as demarcated subjects separate from others and to locate us in bounded temporalities and trajectories of identification" but are actually potential "space[s] of contradiction, drift, homelessness" (267). Smith is using "home" here to refer to the ways that humans believe themselves to be coherent subjects with "finite, discrete, unified" understandings of self, and the ways in which unified subjectivity is so easily broken down in the face of social forces that mark some bodies as "abnormal or grotesque" while leaving other bodies unmarked (267, 268). For my purposes, however, the idea of the body as site of homelessness speaks to the myriad ways in which the female characters in contemporary novels and films embody the reordering or rejection

of their home spaces in order to manifest their displeasure in visible ways. If we can be made to feel unwelcome in the metaphorical homes of our bodies, it stands to reason that similar feelings of distress within the literal space of home would be discernable on our actual bodies. This appears to be the case in many of the texts I examine in this dissertation. When Luwana Nedeed in *Linden Hills* is expelled from her position as homemaker, wife, and mother, she does not express her pain with her voice or pen, but chooses to record her days of silent protest on her body, by carving on her chest with a hatpin. In response to their domestic entrapment, the Lisbon girls in *The Virgin Suicides* restructure their homes and their bodies simultaneously when they commit suicide within their house, shifting it from a space of security to a tomb. But the idea of the body as home also works to further subjugate female figures who are already marginalized. In *Housekeeping*, for example, the transient body becomes an extension and mirror of the disordered home space and each site—body and home—suffers by comparison. Likewise, for working-class figures, the body and home are seen as mutually contaminating/contaminated spaces. The working-class figures in the texts in this study are as likely to be hampered by the connection between body and home as they are to find within it room for subversion.

Although there is a large body of academic work on domesticity in America, it chiefly focuses on considerations of gender and race in the domestic sphere in literature of the nineteenth century, with some work analyzing domesticity in the first half of the

twentieth century.¹ This work sheds light on the current modes of representing houses, but cannot address the specificity of home life and the historical shifts in the late twentieth century.² This dissertation examines both unconventional representations of home and domesticity (such as how home functions in working-class narratives and how home is portrayed when individuals are homeless or transient) as well as more traditionally examined, conventional, middle-class modes of domesticity. The texts I consider here are significant in that they work to complicate traditional notions of home by speaking from positions of marginality. My decision to focus on representations of home and domestic spaces stems from a belief that the *idea* of home—what it is as a structure as well as how it can function as a political and rhetorical tool—has always been a particularly contested one in American history. Considered by most of us to be a place of individual freedom, in which we can relax and “be ourselves,” home has instead often been a powerful force of commodification, oppression, and domination. Home, as part of the American Dream, has moved through a number of incarnations but has always essentially been a weapon of a conservative middle and upper-middle class. Serving the dual function of both haven from a dangerous and confusing world and indicator of adherence to the expectations of such a world, home is fraught with tensions

¹ Many studies focus on the daily realities of housework and home making, the “cult of domesticity” in the late nineteenth century, and/or the return of the sentimentalizing of home that occurs immediately following WWII. Some of these texts include, Susan Strasser’s *Never Done* (1982), Clifford Edward Clark’s *The American Family Home 1800-1960* (1986), Glenna Matthews’s *Just a Housewife* (1987), Ann Romines’ *The Home Plot* (1992), Suellen Hoy’s *Chasing Dirt* (1995), *The American Home*, edited by Eleanor McD. Thompson (1998), Kathleen McHugh’s *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (1999), Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd’s *Sentenced to Everyday Life* (2004), and Sarah Pink’s *Home Truths* (2004).

² There are a handful of studies that examine the idea of home in more recent texts. Some of these include Marilyn R. Chandler’s *Dwelling in the Text* (1991), Helen Fiddymont Levy’s *Fiction of the Home Place* (1992), and Jeannette Batz Cooperman’s *The Broom Closet* (1999).

between inside and out, autonomy and conformity, and self and family/community. These tensions, and how the breaks in them are manifested, are the focus of this study.

The period from the 1960s through the early twenty-first century sees a significant shift in considerations and representations of the connection between home and self. Earlier in the century the role of home in American life was greatly impacted both by the country's involvement in WWII and by the return of soldiers and the subsequent expansion of suburbia after the war. Although home was allowed to be a much more fluid concept during wartime (with women frequently acting as head of household or leaving the home sphere to take jobs) the end of the war signaled a need for home to return to more strictly bound conventions. Shaped largely by advertising, television, and magazines, home in the late 1940s and 1950s was situated as both an ideology and a lived reality that functioned to normalize gender roles and boost the middle-class. In this moment, home becomes the most conspicuous symbol of adherence to middle-class ideals and the accomplishment of the American Dream. By the 1960s however, the realities of suburban sprawl, the stultification of corporate jobs, the race for consumer goods, and the constriction of the housewife's life begin to reveal themselves. These worries about the direction of the country and the role individuals would play in it are manifest in the home. Critic Tim Putnam asserts that the concept of home and what it should be shifts in the 1960s "As the material life supports of modernity are taken for granted, [and] home becomes the supreme domain for personalization and, by consequence, of endless negotiations" (145). Thus, as those aspects of home that originally required endless hours of maintenance and physical labor are replaced by

changes in technology and infrastructure, houses cease to be thought of as things that sustain our physical lives and become spaces that reflect and influence our emotional, psychological, and spiritual lives. Simultaneous with this shift from home as shelter to home as expressive device, houses were increasingly seen as receptacles and display cases for consumer goods; increasingly, particularly in the current crises in the housing market, homes are also viewed as commodities themselves. The novels and films that I consider in this dissertation are produced in the wake of the shift in roles for the home. The most recent texts in this study appear at a moment in which the country is attempting to find solid ground on which to define its values and goals for the next millennium.

A close examination of the way homes and houses are represented in recent literature and film is particularly urgent in the current moment. In the wake of the housing crisis, the U.S. is struggling to understand how home will function in the years to come. As a country that has always placed home ownership at the pinnacle of success, the U.S. is struggling with the reality that many people will not achieve this piece of the American Dream, and that others will have it pulled away. The instability of the housing market has generated shifts in our understanding of who can, should, and does own a home, as well as how we use our homes in both practical and emotional ways. The texts that I examine throughout the dissertation portray individuals across a wide spectrum of living situations all of whom are haunted by the idea of a home that they cannot attain; they conceive of themselves as marginalized or brutalized by the home-myth. By examining texts that deny the limiting definitions of home, and by including positions

that are often excluded from the home myth/dream, I complicate views of what home is and can be.³

As a nation built on the endorsement of Westward expansion, adventure, and entrepreneurship, America has produced a literature replete with movement and journeying.⁴ Movement in American history and in its literature is indicative of a need and desire to find new spaces of opportunity and refuge. The “West” serves as a mythical placeholder for a hopeful and fruitful future and a safe haven for fugitives and misfits from the east, while also functioning as a physical site of violence and genocide. The (still fairly) open spaces of the western United States have played a powerful role in creating a concurrent sense of opportunity and rootlessness in the American consciousness and in our literature. Our sense of “homeland,” it has often been argued, is not as powerfully entrenched as in other countries. Janis P. Stout argues that the United States has a singular relationship to the journey and to the idea of home because the U.S. was founded on the myth of eternal movement. She explicitly distinguishes the tendency to look forward and out, rather than inward or back, from the connection to place felt in other cultures. To this end Stout distinguishes the “home-seeking journey from the homeward (returning home) journey” and argues that the U.S. is a nation of home seekers, since, unlike most of the world, we have no collective sense of homeland to which we hope to return (42). Constantly moving, Stout suggests, we have at best a tentative hold on a shared mythology of homeland as a physical place.

³ Shelley Mallett offers a useful overview of much of the critical literature on home. In the essay, Mallett delineates the multitude of approaches scholars have taken in their study of home.

⁴ As Janis P. Stout notes in *The Journey Narrative in American Literature* “From its beginnings, the American literary tradition has been characterized to a remarkable and peculiar degree, by narratives of movement, of motion, its great icons the track through the forest and the superhighway” (3).

But if our communal connection to place is limited, the value we place on the space of home is not. As Marilyn Chandler notes, “In a country whose history has been focused for so long on the business of settlement and ‘development,’ the issue of how to stake out territory, clear it, cultivate it, and build on it has been of major economic, political, and psychological consequence” (1). It is for this reason that the positive potential of mobility has always been seen as somehow opposed to the importance of home and family. In other words, while the ability to relocate for financial gain or upward mobility has always been important, it has also been seen as somewhat threatening to the stability of home life on both an individual and a national scale. Central to this threat is the fact that while motion and exploration have always been viable options in America, they have only been so for men. Traditionally tied to the home-place and to children, women were and are far less able to pick up and move to new locations. Although moving west, or from rural communities to urban centers, was often undertaken at great financial, physical, and emotional risk by men, the same venture would have been nearly impossible for women. Even in a culture that values and often praises highly mobile individuals, women are largely tied to the physical space of home.

In order for mobility to be seen as dangerous to home life, home must be constructed in a particular way. It is important to remember that our contemporary understanding of home as, at least ideally, a haven and a place that shelters, has only been at work since the mass industrialization of the mid-nineteenth century. While we now consider normal homes to house a nuclear family, before industrialization various

non-kin workers and boarders often shared living space with families. Much of a community's work was done within the home and the idea of separate spheres for men and women did not yet exist. Individual communities and kinship networks, as opposed to our country's increasing dependence upon the State, were responsible for an individual's well-being. When work moved out of the home and into factories and businesses located in city centers, the home began to occupy the collective imaginary as a space of retreat from danger, labor, dirt, and the market. It also became a space of the nuclear family, particularly as families began moving in search of work and consequently severed ties to extended family. In this new era, men left the home for work, and women stayed behind to care for the house, grounds, and children. This led to the notion of separate spheres, a concept that, as Shelley Mallet notes, "many historians, sociologists and human geographers attest, [...] was never as neat as the home as haven idea implies" (72). Although the home was now considered a space of rest and refinement, women continued to labor there. Moreover, the home was never a wholly safe space for women or children, further troubling the notion of the private home as a haven from the insecurities and danger of the outside world.

It would therefore seem that the ideas of mobility and home, both considered fundamental to American ideology, stand in stark opposition to one another. Movement cannot help but threaten the establishment and maintenance of community, of a sense of place, of security and order in the home. In contrast then, home would necessarily depend, in its definition and maintenance, on a sense of stability, stasis, connection to community, and the establishment of routine and tradition. How then does one maintain

a sense of autonomy or freedom within this kind of home? Conversely, how does the mobile subject, the wanderer, or the explorer, establish a sense of security, community, or family? Many figures in the literature and film of the late twentieth century respond to the limitations of both home and mobility by attempting to join the two. Either because of the restrictive ideals of gender conformity, or because of the material and philosophical limitations of class structures, home is often seen as a confining space and concept. For the characters I consider here, the fight to escape—from their families, their houses, or their homemaking duties—is essential to their sense of self and their emotional/mental wellbeing. The ways in which these characters resist their perceived entrapment varies greatly depending on gender and economic/class standing but they all share a powerful need to escape the circumstances of home. For some characters, this means acting upon teenage fantasies of independence and freedom, for others it means rejecting the mandate to maintain rigid order and tidiness within their houses, and for still others it means choosing madness or even death as a reasonable alternative to continuing in their current home lives. But home is not always escapable. Often the pull of home, with its potential for security, safety, and happiness, is so strong as to overwhelm the need to leave it. In all cases, leaving home is viewed as a necessary move rather than a frivolous one. Most importantly, home is always a site of longing and mourning in these texts. The tragedy never rests on an individual's inability to leave home but on the failure of the life of home.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine domestic spaces and homemaking practices as conceived by figures who reject the standard American Dream of home and

attempt to escape its confines by physically or mentally leaving the home or by reimagining the home space in new terms. I consider how and why particular figures resist their home lives and attempt to flee or reconstruct them. I argue that traditional and conservative class and gender ideologies largely determine both the perceived need to escape or reconfigure the home space and the ways an individual does so. The differences, then, between how men and women and middle-class and working-class individuals conceive of the ideal home and how they manifest their resistance to their home situations is profound. Men, for example, are far more likely than women in these texts to attempt to physically leave their home spaces. Paradoxically however, women, when they do decide that home can no longer be abided, are far more successful in leaving in meaningful and permanent ways. Class differences likewise determine both the need to escape and the lengths to which an individual will go to achieve freedom. Middle-class individuals are far more likely to consider their home situations unsatisfactory even though working-class homes are far more likely to be physically inadequate and uncomfortable. The response to working-class homes, then, is more often one of accommodation than escape. Working-class figures are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to physically alter the spaces of their homes and to creatively confront the limitations of their home-lives by allowing for a more fluid understanding of family, housing, and basic necessities such as food and clothing. In each of the various kinds of home resistance that this study will address, characters are driven to move away from the middle-class ideal of home because their lived reality falls short of that ideal.

Chapter II, “The Horrible Domestic,” begins my examination of women’s place within the home in the late twentieth century. Through a reading of the entrapped female characters in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, I argue that the suburb functions as a space that, through the comingled drives of privacy and surveillance, contributes to the isolation and paradoxical disembodiment of women within the home. Moreover, I argue that these women utilize the tools of their oppression—domestic duties tied to cooking, mothering, and housekeeping—in order to reclaim the power of their bodies and attempt to make their voices heard. By enacting their rage on their bodies, they create a female-centered history that rejects domestic oppression even as it silences them through madness, isolation, and death. Furthering my examination of bodily rebellion, I examine the possibility of suicide as a powerful, if problematic, response to domestic entrapment in Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*. Similar to *Linden Hills*, *The Virgin Suicides* presents an incomplete narrative of women’s isolation and rebellion; where this novel differs is in the ways that men, through surveillance and documenting, are granted power over the creation and interpretation of a female narrative. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the male gaze and voice is privileged; the young men in the novel inadvertently work to reinforce the girls’ domestic entrapment when they take it upon themselves to be the girls’ rescuers and archivists.

Chapter III, “Homeward Bound,” focuses on Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, and Mona Simpson’s *Anywhere but Here* as novels that centralize the tension between longing for home and longing for freedom. Specifically, these texts utilize the figure of the wandering woman in order to critique both the limits placed on

women who are expected to maintain and stay within the domestic sphere as well as romanticized portrayals of women who leave the domestic space and become transients. These texts both suggest that limiting women's possibilities to either home or wandering makes success in either place nearly impossible. These novels offer alternatives to such binary thinking in portraying women who approach both home and away with a more fluid sense of possibilities. What is particularly striking about these texts is their refusal to romanticize the protagonists' "adventures" outside of the home or their unusual home-making styles. These women come under attack for their inability to adhere to strict home-making and child-rearing norms. These novels offer sensitive portrayals of unconventional women approaching the task of home making in unconventional ways. While it is tempting to consider these novels as sheer celebrations of women's liberation through the rejection of the domestic-sphere, the texts do not support such an assessment. Instead, they centralize the tensions that surround domesticity and the decision to leave it behind. I would argue, in fact, that the power of these texts lies in their ambiguity. Home is neither sanctuary nor prison in these works. Likewise, transience offers the potential for both growth and isolation. The moments in which domesticity and transience intersect and inform one another offer insight into why home is such a powerful and complex conceptual framework. Additionally, the focus on the figure of the wanderer and the potential for such figures to break down the walls of traditional domestic spaces highlights the ways that women are victimized at the hands of domesticity whether they remain within it or not.

In the next chapter, “The Working-Class Home: Poverty, Class, and the Home Dream,” I turn to considerations of home and class in Carolyn Chute’s *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Debra Granik’s film *Winter’s Bone*. These texts move even further from notions of comfortable, middle-class domesticity by portraying home situations that typically exist outside of the “home-dream” paradigm. Each of these texts focuses on women whose home spaces are unsafe or undesirable. The stark representations of the reality of poverty and limited options for housing become politically powerful by questioning assumptions about typical domesticity as middle-class, comfortable, and safe. I argue that the focus in these texts on the damaging power and overwhelming force of conventional domesticity suggests that alternatives to traditional homemaking need to be found in order to make room for those who cannot, or will not, adhere to conventional expectations of the respectable, middle-class home. These texts feature figures who embody the absorption of the human figure into excessive, dirty, or unbound domestic practices by highlighting liminal spaces filled with the debris of poverty, transience, and violence. A consideration of domestic spaces, visibility, and surveillance, particularly by figures of authority, takes on new meanings in these texts because the homes in question are already disenfranchised.

The conclusion to this dissertation looks at the ways in which homes are represented in recent post-apocalyptic texts. I focus on Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* because of the way it reveals America’s anxieties about home and its role in our lives combined with our fears about the future of the world and our place—in terms of a literal, physical space we will occupy, and a figurative, psychological concept—within

that world. It also allows me to consider the way that gender works when women are removed from the domestic scene by being removed altogether. Indeed, gender *and* class become largely irrelevant in this work. Men take an equal or often larger share in home-making tasks and purchasing power and class divisions are completely erased. By upending established notions of place, space, home, domesticity, and mobility, and their concomitant ties to gender and class, post-apocalyptic texts demand both flexibility in our thinking about these concepts, and the potential for a broader understanding of what is acceptable and desirable; they are further powerful in their ability to compel a recognition of the *emotional* hold these concepts have on us. *The Road* imagines home as a purely nostalgic ideal, and mobility as a necessary means of security and safety.

My objective in this dissertation is an assessment of the ways in which filmic and literary texts represent domesticity at the current moment. I work to expand conceptions of domestic fiction by critiquing limiting ideologies of home that establish an unmanageable binary between stasis and movement, security and freedom. The literary and filmic texts I study offer representations of home spaces in the second half of the twentieth century that complicate ideas, still prevalent in popular culture, of the ideal, middle-class home conceived of in the American Dream. In all of the texts I work with, including narratives of the white middle-class, working-class, and black domesticities, domesticity exists as both a repressive paradigm, and one rich with subversive potential. In each text, figures consider themselves marginalized by the power of conventional, limiting ideologies of home and work to imagine ways of combining the desire for home/security with the need for movement/freedom. Through a series of chapters that

examine dangerous domesticities and women's spectacular departures, mobile domesticity, working class alternative domesticity, and home in post-apocalyptic texts, I argue that such works, by disrupting the powerful binaries surrounding conceptions of home, present moments of convergence that disavow, and offer alternatives to, narrow and damaging visions of home.

CHAPTER II

THE HORRIBLE DOMESTIC:

LINDEN HILLS, THE VIRGIN SUICIDES, AND SUBURBAN SURVEILLANCE

Because any dwelling is closed and open, it conceals me and shows me; it designates me as a unique individual and as a member of a community. [...] the dwelling is essentially what ensures secrecy and visibility: secrecy in closing doors and windows, secrecy in chests and shut closets, secrecy in putting the outside world at a distance; visibility in hospitality and shared meals and in conflicts and contradictory claims. The question of the hidden and the visible in the dwelling, therefore, is the question of the relationship between secrecy and the relationships with others.

— Perla Korosec-Serfaty, “Experience and Use of the Dwelling”

To walk in the suburbs is to announce a crippling, a renunciation of speed. In the suburbs only outsiders walk, while the houses are illuminated as stages, scenes of an uncertain action. In these overapparent arrangements of interior space, confusion and distance mark the light.

— Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*

In this chapter, I begin with an examination of the prototypical American domestic environment: the suburbs. The suburbs have played a powerful role in shaping the contours of the American domestic landscape, and continue prominently in the American imaginary. As a real, measurable entity, suburbia stands as the most profound housing scheme ever to mark the United States. In their beginning, suburbs were built within city limits, signaling the desire of affluent urbanites to claim large plots of land at the edge of economic centers. In procuring untrammelled land in semi-wild spaces that still maintained spatial and psychic ties to the city, these first suburbs established the dream of combining the benefits of rural solitude and privacy with urban opportunity

and community. In the 150 to 200 years since,⁵ the suburbs have undergone vast changes in purpose, prestige, and perceived effects,⁶ and stand now as the most common form of housing in the United States and much of the Western world.

In this chapter, I focus on the suburbs as containing a particular kind of domestic space that reveals issues of gender, history, and geography in unique ways that are significant to my discussion of how women disrupt the boundaries of domesticity in order to establish new ways of understanding home. I examine a pair of suburban novels, Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985), as a means of establishing the continued force of the suburban myth while also revealing the ways in which women who are trapped in that myth accomplish their escape by co-opting the tools of their oppression and enacting embodied resistance⁷ to surveillance. I have chosen to focus on these two novels because both critique the entrapment of women within suburbia, the use of the trope of entrapment itself, and the complicity of the men and women who allow such entrapment to continue. Moreover, both of these novels were published in an era of renewed political focus on "family values," and a concomitant investment in the home sphere and women's roles as homemakers and

⁵ Kenneth Jackson argues that suburbs have existed as long as civilization itself, but marks the early slum suburbs, consisting of make-shift housing, and inhabited by the transient, or impoverished residents of large urban centers, and the rise of affluent suburban developments in the Northeast from about 1800-1860 as the advent of suburbs that were established in order to maintain a connection to the trade and entertainment available in cities.

⁶ Purpose: the reason for building various suburbs has not remained constant from year to year or place to place. Prestige: initially for the wealthy, suburbs have, at various moments, been seen as affordable alternatives to the city, as makeshift communities of the poor, and as the natural home for the upwardly mobile middle class. Perceived Effects: on the psyches of those who live there and those who are denied entrance, on the American Dream, on the shape of the family, on gender roles, and on the environment.

⁷ By "embodied resistance" I mean protests of confining situations that are enacted on and through the body. These protests take the form of self-mutilation, suicide, and exhibitionist or performative acts.

moral guardians.⁸ Texts in this era, that consider the continued restraints placed on women within the home sphere, reveal that the dangers of conformity and gender oppression, particularly as it functions in the suburbs, were not alleviated through feminism or the Civil Rights Movement. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a surge of suburban horror films that similarly focus on the plight of the family and of teenagers in the suburbs. However, contrary to texts that utilize the horror genre to question the power and validity of the suburban dream, the texts in this chapter eschew the supernatural, suggesting that the suburbs are horrific enough without the addition of the uncanny.⁹ The fact that women come to violent ends in these texts while under the watchful eyes of their neighbors only increases the horror of their situations. I consider the focus in these texts on the eventual “escape” of female protagonists whose confinement is figured as a punishment of the body.¹⁰

⁸ *Linden Hills* was written and is set during the Reagan presidency. *The Virgin Suicides* was published at the end of George H. W. Bush’s presidency, but is set in the mid 1970s.

⁹ It should be noted, however, that these texts do draw upon Gothic tropes in order to highlight the façade of the suburban dream. Although these novels differ in the extent to which they diverge from reality, both could be considered Suburban Gothic texts. Bernice M. Murphy, in her 2009 study, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, examines, and attempts to pin down, the use of the term “Suburban Gothic” and how it reveals myriad anxieties bombarding middle-class, white Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. She begins a definition of the Suburban Gothic by stating that it, “is a sub-genre of the wider American gothic tradition that often dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass suburbanization of the United States” (2). While this might seem an obvious place to begin, it is significant that the genre is defined here as not merely taking place within the suburbs but as inherently defined *by* the suburbs. The anxieties of life in the suburbs—the feelings of homogeneity, disconnect from broader society, the enforced house-binding of women and mothers—creates the appropriate atmosphere for Gothicism. Further, while often appearing to be merely Gothic tales in an updated setting, the concerns of the Suburban Gothic are unique to its time and place and are all the more unsettling for their comparatively placid settings.

¹⁰ Within these texts, bodies and houses are both viewed as sites of entrapment as well as sites open to invasion. Breaching the boundaries of the body—through behaviors that are socially coded as inappropriate or simply through calling attention to the abject by bleeding, having sex, or dying—often involves a similar breaching of domestic space. I will come back to this point throughout this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

Of central importance to this discussion is the question of who, or what, has the most agency in suburbia. In general, it would seem that the spaces themselves have more agency than does any individual. Suburbia functions only through a series of regulatory mechanisms—such as surveillance and gossip—that work to maintain sameness and conformity. In order to live comfortably within suburbia, individuals must forgo individual desires or goals that might single them out as different. Therefore, the combined efforts of many individuals working together to monitor one another's behaviors has the effect of removing individual power. The regulatory mechanisms to which I refer, and to which I will return later in this chapter, are so powerful because they need not be seen in order to function. The women in *Linden Hills* and *The Virgin Suicides* who protest being supervised, controlled, and handled by their neighbors and families achieve a measure of agency that undermines the typical functioning of suburbia.

Despite its long history and changing contours, much of the chronicle of the suburbs remains unknown to the majority of Americans. Instead, we continue to think of the suburbs as a place of safety and community that began in the 1950s during a golden age of family and domestic bliss. In the introduction to the second edition of *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz reflects on the tenacity of this myth years after the book's initial publication in 1992:

the years since 1992 have been disappointing, because of the stubborn persistence of the myths that are discussed in this book. Despite ever-mounting evidence that families of the past were not as idyllic and

families of the present not as dysfunctional as they are often portrayed, many political leaders and opinion makers in the United States continue to filter our changing family experiences and trends through the distorted lens of historical mythologizing about past family life. The contemporary family behavior or value that is unfavorably contrasted with “the way things used to be” may vary. But the myths themselves remain remarkably resistant to change. (xi)

Coontz is discussing the myth of the American family here, and that family is figured as white, middle-class, suburban, and nuclear. And while her focus is not on home specifically, the suburban home is inferred and functions as a catch-all for beliefs about home spaces as well as class, race, and family. We rarely discuss one category—suburbs or family—without the other; they are so intertwined that they seem to have come about simultaneously in the middle of the twentieth century. With little understanding of the true history of the suburbs, the common response to them, as can be seen in television, film, and literature, is either wistful longing for an era that has passed us by, or utter disdain for a homogenized landscape filled with equally similar people.¹¹ While neither of these responses reflects the actual truth of the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, their after-image (burned into American cultural memory by television shows such as *Leave It To Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*) is so strong that more nuanced versions of the suburbs, as neither heaven nor hell, are exceedingly rare.

¹¹ See Robert Beuka’s *SuburbiaNation* for further discussion of the representations of suburbia as either utopic or dystopic. Beuka’s argument is that both kinds of depictions have become cliché.

Therefore, while suburbia has had an overwhelming effect on the shape of our landscape, our environment, and our philosophies about home, its most significant feature is the way it has remained unchanged in the American imaginary since the middle of the twentieth century. The persistent image of the suburbs is particularly significant for the lasting impact it has had on our vision of the American Dream and its concomitant signposts: specifically, how we perceive race, gender, and class. Although there is now a large body of historical and theoretical work on the suburbs, these texts tend to center on the post-war years up to the 1960s, often focusing on how and why the suburbs emerged. The perception has been that the widespread racial integration of the suburbs, the increasingly diverse representation of suburbs in popular culture, and suburbia's basic ubiquity have relieved the American public of a false view of the suburbs as whitewashed and homogeneous. But, I argue that the multitude of texts, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the present day, that so often draw on stock tropes of uniformity and ennui point to the continued force of the suburban myth. Moreover, they indicate that we have not moved past the concerns of the suburbs, neither its tempting promise of pseudo-utopia nor its threat of homogeneity and mind/body snatching. The continuation of standard ways of representing the suburbs locates an enduring thread of unease in this now familiar landscape. Whether texts focus on the benefits of suburbia, or seek to highlight its dangers, the focus is always on a vision of the suburbs as it existed in the popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s. The view of suburbia is so entrenched and widespread that both its proponents and detractors work to maintain its power.

The significance of the suburbs in the American imaginary is most clearly seen in the years after World War II. The massive increase in systematic, planned suburbs in the years after the war came about in response to the growing need for affordable housing for returning veterans and their rapidly expanding families. As men returned from war and women gave up, or were forced to leave, their jobs for them, single-family, detached housing became a respite from the crowded conditions of war, as well as the renewed proper place for women. Although various kinds of suburbs already existed—such as those built around the turn of the twentieth century at the end of trolley-car lines—the post-war suburbs were immediately viewed as a new and different kind of social environment. These first mass-produced suburbs, exemplified by the Levittown developments on Long Island, were built quickly, and in great numbers with little attention to variety, aesthetic appeal, (either in the house itself, or the neighborhoods), or the creation of communities.¹² Focused on speed, Levitt built his developments with virtually identical houses, and little to no infrastructure or common space, such as parks or community centers in which residents might meet friends and neighbors.¹³ Equally problematic was the fact that these new “towns” were, in fact, largely isolated from the amenities typical to communities that grow more slowly and organically. Access to medical care, groceries, and schools usually required a car, something that most families had, but that was not necessarily available during the day to the housewife who was

¹² The reality of these first suburbs stands in stark contrast to the myth of suburbia as community-centered, well-appointed, and comfortable.

¹³ William Levitt was the first developer to use assembly-line techniques in home building. Unfortunately for early residents, the speed and efficiency gained by such methods did not translate into the amenities they needed: the first Levittown was erected without a sewer system, trash removal, or schools. Levitt did provide a handful of parks and swimming pools, but they were insufficient for the eighty thousand residents in Levittown (Hayden 136-137).

responsible for running such errands. Demand for these homes was, nonetheless, huge: hundreds of people spent days in line waiting for the first houses to be available for sale.

As these early suburbs filled up, the inhabitants found themselves in a place of rigid spatial boundaries and rules that worked to maintain a sameness that went beyond house plans and determined who was allowed to live in the suburbs, and how to behave once there. Although the history of suburbia is a varied one that began in many different geographic areas, and included individuals of many different races, ethnicities, and classes, the planned suburbs of the post-war years were strictly white. The most famous proof of this is the fact that William Levitt specified in his contracts that “residents must be of the Caucasian race” (Hayden 135). Racist practices aimed at maintaining the racial purity of new suburbs were widespread and led to the perception that no one of color lived in the suburbs.¹⁴ And the truth of the matter was that many of the new inhabitants of the suburbs wanted their neighborhoods to remain exclusive. Even if the reasons for wanting to leave urban centers varied—with some fleeing rising crime rates, others hoping to escape cramped buildings with small apartments, and still others resentful of new levels of ethnic mixing in cities—most everyone was hoping that the suburbs would provide them with space, privacy, and neighbors with whom they could feel comfortable.

As Dianne Harris argues, “owning a single-family detached house with its own private, fenced garden symbolized not just security from outsiders who might threaten home and family but also the security of confirmed membership in the white, middle-

¹⁴ Kenneth Jackson points out that there was some truth to this myth, stating that “in 1960 not a single one of the Long Island Levittown’s 82,000 residents was black” (241).

class, American majority” (129). Concerns about crime rates, crowding, and loss of neighborhood identity in urban centers were often veiled fears about non-white neighbors encroaching on formerly all-white areas.¹⁵ Thus, fears about invasion by outsiders and desires for space and privacy of one’s own coalesced in the suburbs, a space that visually and ideologically announced its adherence to sameness to all who entered. Privacy, always a matter of keeping one’s body and space safe from infiltration by uninvited forces, became synonymous with the suburban mode of living. As Harris notes, “Privacy here is viewed as a code for excluding others, whether neighbors or strangers, such that the privacy discourse is exclusionary. Design for privacy is therefore design for exclusion and is about spatial purification” (129).

The suburbs are a paradoxical space for efforts to maintain privacy by purification and exclusion. On the one hand, the layout of the suburbs, with its clearly defined borders between housing plots, and sharp distinctions between yard and street, would seem an easily defensible locale. Since “Privacy is associated with notions of a pure self, a pure identity, and a pure family, and all of these must remain unsoiled by outside influences, [and] therefore necessitates maintaining rigid boundaries, which ultimately become exclusionary,” the suburbs offer obvious lines of defense (Harris 129-130). The question then becomes, from whom are suburbanites defending their homes? If Kenneth Jackson’s assertions are correct, and the suburbs in the 1940s and 1950s were almost 100% white, and remain largely segregated to this day, they would seem a safe

¹⁵ This whiteness is a problematic category on its own since, by the 1940s it tended to encompass individuals of various European descents. Being ethnically Italian, Irish, or German was no longer as important as appearing white, and maintaining middle-class standards in housing, dress, and customs. As Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese note, “suburbanization blurred older divisions along class and ethnic lines, while reinforcing distinctions on the basis of race and gender” (4).

space, one that did not need defending. But, the shape of the suburb in the 1940s and 1950s was a relatively new one, in need of reinforcement in order to establish itself as central to the American Dream. Women who had recently worked in the paid labor force were now back in the home, and many people who were used to the pace of city life had to restructure their days and their amusements to fit a radically altered way of life. Furthermore, while cities had their difficulties, close-quarters meant that people were always nearby, and community could be established in the workplace as well as in individual neighborhoods. Moving to the suburbs meant freedom, but also isolation from other people. One might mercifully be further from “the noises, smells, and activities of extended family members, neighbors, and street life that recalled inner-city, prewar dwelling patterns” (Harris 129), but such distance was also a separation from support systems and shared activities once taken for granted. Although the suburbs stood for a clear set of values and desires, the geographical space of the suburbs—located between the urban and the rural—as well as its physical, spatial make-up—how suburbia is actually laid out—work to create a concept of space that is ahistorical and from which cultural referents have been removed.¹⁶ Suburbs defined themselves both in relation to

¹⁶ Susan Stewart speaks of “the invisibility and blindness of the suburbs,” a double-edged critique that establishes the undeviating nature of suburbia (all suburbs are the same, and all houses within any given suburb are the same) as well as its disconnect from the rest of American history (1). In this estimation, the suburbs are bound up in a nostalgia for the American Dream of home that paradoxically strives for newness, for the future. Stewart argues that “the suburbs present us with a negation of the present; a landscape consumed by its past and its future” represented in her mind by “the nostalgic and the technological. A butterchurn fashioned into an electric light, a refrigerator covered by children’s drawings” (1). Thus for women who are obliged to spend their days within the suburban home, there is an increased difficulty in locating themselves within a culture or history that might help buttress their sense of identity within a mass of sameness. Women in the suburb are isolated from one another, from their surroundings, and from their history.

the cities from which they often grew, but also as new and separate places that were sheltered from the influence of the city.

If the suburbs attempted to define themselves by maintaining purity through surveillance and privacy, such tactics were particularly problematic for women. In many ways, the suburb can be viewed as a domain of women, a world that men depart from daily to go to jobs in nearby cities, leaving neighborhoods, and the many civic organizations that were eventually established there, to be run by the wives and mothers left at home. In other ways, suburbs function to isolate women within their separate houses. Left with the sole responsibility for the care and running of the house and children, many women felt overwhelmed by the unending tasks of housekeeping and mothering while also finding little in their work to occupy their minds or fulfill their needs. Thus, the suburbs are paradoxical spaces for women, spaces that both connect and separate. By allowing women a measure of autonomy and community, they are spaces that hold the potential to empower. However, since women are more likely to spend their time within their own, separate houses the suburb becomes a space that disenfranchises women. As “noplaces” suburbs function as spaces, individual, and disconnected pieces of architecture that purport to protect and nurture, but actually entrap. In the suburbs, lawns, fences, and even drapery, act as dividing lines between one household and the next. Though these physical boundaries might signal separation, it is also true that many of these dividing lines involve a literal butting up against one’s neighbors. Thus, the suburb becomes a space of unavoidable and paradoxical contact; windows, fences, and property lines are permeable boundaries that invite intimacy at the same time as they

seek to maintain privacy. Lives in the suburbs are separate and private, but in plain view of multiple, similar lives. As the primary inhabitants of the suburbs, women have long been the focus of such entrapment. Less mobile than their employed, male counterparts (or men and boys who are simply more free to walk about in public), women become associated with their home spaces in profound ways.¹⁷

By creating a space that feels threatened from unknown outside forces, and that can only maintain its sense of exclusivity and safety by keeping those forces out, the suburbs bound privacy and surveillance. It should come as no surprise that the late 1940s and 1950s, a moment of mass migration to the suburbs that saw a great spreading out of people and communities, would also give rise to the Red Scare and McCarthyism. Although the two phenomena might have different root causes, the suburbs helped to foster an atmosphere capable of sustaining a general terror of difference, as well as a heightened impulse toward watching out for such differences.¹⁸ Keeping up with the Joneses meant more than procuring the latest and most fashionable appliances and automobiles: it also meant watching your neighbors for signs that they might not “belong” in your neighborhood. Likewise, such diligent watching and judging turned inward, and became a kind of self-monitoring that worked to maintain the decorum and upward striving that was dictated by television and magazine advertisements. In an article about contemporary suburbs and the behavior of the mothers who live there,

¹⁷ The figure of the stultified housewife, first introduced to the masses by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, is a well-known one and is often treated as a cliché of the 1950s and 1960s. What interests me in this dissertation is the fact that literature and film continues to turn to the figure of a woman isolated in her house, usually a suburban house, as a way to explore the function of home in contemporary America.

¹⁸ See Harris for further discussion of the rising fear of “surveillance mechanisms,” and of subliminal suggestion entering private homes through covert means and the television respectively.

Holly Blackford concludes that suburban women measure their own mothering abilities, and thus their rights to membership in the club of middle-class whiteness, by watching each other's behavior with their children. She compares suburban playgrounds, and the unspoken rules that govern proper speech, paraphernalia, and mothering techniques that go on there, to Foucault's Panopticon. The mothers watch their own children, each other's children, and the interactions between mothers and children generally. They believe they are being responsible, well-prepared parents adhering to pre-established and obvious modes of conduct that will insure their children's safety. She further argues that the mothers' surveillance, and their physical presence, even when they are not actively watching the children, has a profound impact on the children's behavior. Blackford argues that, "Although surveillance is equated with keeping children safe, panopticism also seeks to produce a certain kind of subjectivity in children, an internalization of discipline through self-monitoring" (95).

The kind of "internalization of discipline" witnessed in this example, and observed most clearly in the children, can be more broadly applied to the behavior of all suburbanites, and particularly to women. If, as Kenneth Jackson suggests, questions of class tended to be less important than those of race and gender in the middle of the twentieth century, and if suburbs of the time were predominantly peopled by white, middle-class families (or those that aspired to the middle-class and were successful at hiding their lack of material wealth), it stands to reason that gender would be the prominent category of focus within suburbia. Moreover, since women were, and continue to be, the primary inhabitants of the suburbs (with many women staying home

during the day to care for the house and children), it follows that they would be the primary creators and objects of the kind of internalized surveillance Blackford's observations describe.

I contend that this self-monitoring continued to define the way the suburbs function in the United States toward the end of the twentieth century and still does so today. Such norming is effective because it takes place in the open. While suburbanites in the 1950s and 1960s might have feared monitoring at the hands of the government, or subliminal messages sent by nefarious outside forces, regulatory practices within the suburbs took place during backyard barbecues and Tupperware parties. A scene from the first season of the AMC network's critically acclaimed drama *Mad Men* is instructive here. In the episode "Marriage of Figaro" the female protagonist, Betty, the quintessential 1950s housewife, and her husband, Don, have a party for their daughter Sally. All the families in the neighborhood are invited, the men socializing together and the women convening in the kitchen. Betty has invited a new neighbor, Helen, a divorcee, who arrives late and bearing a gift that she has wrapped in Christmas paper. While much is made in the episode of her single-status, her true offenses are more subtle. Helen arrives late, and must enter a group of women who have already been talking about her. Her poorly wrapped gift signals either her inability to manage her home properly or her disregard for the conventions that govern young girls' birthday parties. But the final error comes when Don fails to return from the store with Sally's birthday cake. Trying to be helpful and win her way into the circle of women, Helen offers to get a frozen Sara Lee cheesecake from her house. Although Betty takes her up

on her offer, it is clear that Helen has revealed herself as different from the other women. It is not so much the fact that she *has* a Sara Lee cheesecake as that she admits to having one, and thinks it is a suitable substitute for Sally's birthday cake. Helen is aware that the other women judge her but does not seem to have turned that scrutiny inward in order to self-monitor properly. The message here is clear: Helen has broken the covenant of the suburbs by being a divorced woman. Unlike those around her, she fails to adhere to unspoken rules of conduct and announces her difference in minor actions. She has been, and will continue to be, surveilled by everyone in the neighborhood. This example illustrates the ways that suburban women monitor one another and points to the ways that such representations continue to populate popular culture treatments of suburbia. Women are seen as trapped within their homes, and codes of behavior, both by their circumstances, and by self-imposed regulations.

In the texts that I examine in this chapter, entrapped women appropriate the tools of their oppression and reverse the power of surveillance that has held them in check. They do this by marking their protest on their bodies and taking their struggles beyond their front doors (or by inviting outsiders in) and making their suffering public and visible. The significance of surveillance and privacy in determining women's behaviors and movements, both inside and outside of the home, is profound. I argue that these women make bold moves toward reordering notions of domesticity by depriving it of its suppressive power and airing their dirty laundry on the front lawn. In *Linden Hills* and *The Virgin Suicides*, as is so often the case in suburban literature, this isolation drives women to madness and self-inflicted violence. There is a long history within feminist

writing of viewing psychosis and self-inflicted bodily damage as embodied, albeit limited, protest against patriarchal systems that define proper beauty, proper place, and proper speech. In reference to “hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia,” Susan Bordo argues that “It is no wonder that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied *protest*—unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless” (175). And while Bordo understands the impulse to view muteness or a refusal to leave the home as potentially subversive acts, she is quick to “emphasize the counterproductive, tragically self-defeating (indeed self-deconstructing) nature of that protest” (176).¹⁹ It is true that the violence that women do to themselves in *Linden Hills*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, as well as in the world, is self-defeating, often resulting in death. But Bordo notes an interesting distinction between kinds of protest and their potential effects:

The anorectic, of course, is unaware that she is making a political statement. She may, indeed, be hostile to feminism and any other critical perspectives that she views as disputing her own autonomy and control or questioning the cultural ideals around which her life is organized. Through embodied rather than deliberate demonstration she exposes and indicts those ideals, precisely by pursuing them to the point at which their destructive potential is revealed for all to see. (176)

¹⁹ A number of critics have seconded objections to the notion that women’s pathologies might indicate positive protest against patriarchal oppression. Marta Caminero-Santangelo, in *The Madwoman Can’t Speak*, is a particularly instructive example.

Bordo argues the futility of unconscious protest that inadvertently reasserts the means of oppression that brought about a psychological condition about to begin with.²⁰ The difference between this situation and that of the female protagonists in this chapter is that their resistance is both embodied *and* conscious.²¹ When Lux Lisbon, in *The Virgin Suicides*, climbs onto her roof to have sex with strangers, she does so out of an unknown need for self-destruction, but also because she knows the boys across the street are watching her. She seeks to control more than just her body in these moments and is aware of her actions as protest. Therefore, in this chapter I argue that viewing these women's acts of self-directed violence as subversive enriches an understanding of the ways that women claim control over the confining and silencing ideologies of the patriarchal home when they re-order their primary homes: their bodies.

²⁰ It is important to remember that Bordo is specifically talking about women who suffer from psychological disorders brought on by their inability to reconcile their personal desires with the demands placed upon them by society. Therefore, when Bordo says that the women are enacting "embodied, rather than deliberate, protest" she means that the women are enacting with their bodies that which they are unable to say with words. These women, in fact, may be unaware of their actions as protest, and might even object to others interpreting their actions in this way. Further, Bordo concludes her discussion of this issue by stating that "The pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested" (177).

²¹ It is not my intention to dismiss Bordo's assertions about the problematic nature of women's attempts to control their bodies by doing harm to them, as I think she is correct. I recognize that working with fictional women allows me a level of freedom to theorize about the potential of their subversion, and that such freedom is not available when working with real women and their very real suffering.

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

There had been a dispute for years over the exact location of Linden Hills.
— Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills*

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) is highly invested in critiquing the role of the American Dream, specifically the dream of home, and the ways it continues to limit possibilities for women and African Americans. In this novel, set in the 1980s, the idealized home acts as a lure, promising access to security, comfort, and respectability, while ensnaring its inhabitants in a mode of living that demands that they relinquish ties to racial heritage and to history. Linden Hills is a neighborhood conceived of, designed, and largely built by four successive generations of the Nedeed family. The first Luther Nedeed transformed what began as a parcel of useless land into inexpensive housing for carpetbaggers, transients, and prostitutes. Each subsequent generation, all headed-up by a new Luther Nedeed,²² added to the property, developing a funeral home (still in operation by the current Luther Nedeed), cemetery, and eight curved rows of streets, each lined with luxurious homes. The neighborhood is all black, envisioned by the first Luther Nedeed as “an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County but reflected it black” (9).²³ Although Linden Hills stands as a testament to the power of the black middle-class, it is presented as soulless, having lost its initial goal of being “a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America” (9). Rather than being a space of

²² Each Luther Nedeed is essentially a carbon copy of his father, being so much alike that “It seemed that when old Luther died in 1879, he hadn't died at all” (Naylor 4).

²³ This seems a clear pun on “reflected it back,” and as such is an indication that Linden Hills is not truly a space of black opportunity, but rather a reflection of white power.

resistance to dominant, white culture, it mirrors it, being not black, but merely “successful” (17).

Linden Hills’ success is ironic, and lies in its adherence to model suburban neighborhoods that have historically kept African Americans out. As was true for the first planned suburbs, Levittown especially, admittance to ownership in Linden Hills requires an application. Moreover, Luther Nedeed, like William Levitt, is invested in maintaining the racial homogeneity of his community. Linden Hills is highly sought after property and no matter how many residents move out, the waiting list for property remains lengthy.²⁴ The novel begins by proclaiming Linden Hills’ detachment from history, stating that “memory was a small price to pay” for the “strong, solid walls and heavy, marble steps” that would “bury permanently any outside reflections about other [less prosperous] beginnings” (11). This detachment weakens the foundation of the neighborhood, so that it is not a community at all but merely a collection of houses with rotating occupants.²⁵ Throughout the novel, Naylor suggests that Linden Hills is a space that has removed the possibility of an authentic, historically situated, black experience in the late twentieth Century. While it could be argued that all suburbs lack a sense of place, this is compounded in Linden Hills because of Naylor’s insistence that place, and

²⁴ The very epitome of the planned development, Linden Hills is created specifically to maintain exclusivity and to encourage its inhabitants to never leave. The houses in Linden Hills are not sold to the occupants but are leased to the male head of household for “one thousand years and a day” so long as the subsequent generations continue to live in it. This encourages both stasis and procreation, ensuring that the community will stay where, and as, it is for many generations to come. This isn’t, of course, what actually happens. Residents frequently succumb to the pressures of life in Linden Hills and move out. Thus, while the community ought to stay the same from one generation to the next, it is actually highly dispersant.

²⁵ Barbara Christian argues that “Linden Hills is a secure settlement with a long history” (114), seeming to miss the fact that, as Luke Bouvier notes, “Linden Hills appears to be a stable, highly demarcated, black space” but is actually “a profoundly dislocated and dislocating space” (141, 142).

roots, are essential to black identity.²⁶ For example, when Laurel Dumont, a resident of Linden Hills, spends too many summers away from her Aunt Roberta's house in the backwoods of Georgia, she finds that she is no longer able to find her way back:

renting the Mercedes didn't make her seem more at home. Sitting in that heavy, air-conditioned box and trying to maneuver it over these winding, bumpy roads had given her a fierce headache because she had to concentrate in order not to lose her bearings. Landmarks that should have been familiar took on a different shape and size through the tinted glass and over the circular hood ornament. (227)

This is a clear indictment of African Americans who would turn their backs on family and community in their search for the American (read white) Dream. In this text, a dangerous, entrapping suburb becomes symbolic of the evacuated spirit of the black middle class.

In keeping with more typical suburbs, Linden Hills is hyper-aware of the "kind of people" it lets in. Although there have always been both integrated and minority communities at the outskirts of urban centers, the planned suburbs that began in the years after World War II, and that continue much the same today, were initially established as spaces for whites only. Even after housing laws made it illegal to discriminate against people of color, real estate agents, home owner's associations, and residents maintain the whiteness of select neighborhoods through such practices as

²⁶ There is an implied suggestion in all of Naylor's novels that the only "real" black is a poor black, and that the inhabitants of Linden Hills relinquish their identities when they move in, in essence, becoming "un-black." This is a problematic, if common, suggestion. Naylor's choice to place her upwardly mobile, and thus inauthentic, black characters in the suburbs does, however, support my argument that the suburbs continue to function as rootless and stultifying spaces in the American imaginary.

“steering”²⁷ and surveillance. Thus, suburbia has been, and in many ways continues to be, a space unwelcoming of people of color, and a space that actively attempts to keep such people out.²⁸ In *Linden Hills*, adherence to a rule of “purity” within the suburban boundary takes on new meaning since the suburb is already black. It is therefore, not blackness that has to be surveilled in Linden Hills, but the wrong kind of blackness. Linden Hills is part of Wayne County and shares a border with the urban and largely impoverished town of Putney Wayne. While the urban center breaches the boundaries only briefly in *The Virgin Suicides*—the wind carries car horns, music, and shouting into suburbia on one particularly still afternoon—Putney Wayne is a constant threat to the perceived stability of Linden Hills. To Luther Nedeed and the other inhabitants of Linden Hills, the residents of Putney Wayne represent the kind of blackness that they are trying to escape.²⁹ Thus, when Lester’s friend Willie, himself a resident of Putney Wayne, comes to Linden Hills the week before Christmas and enters a string of suburban homes, his presence triggers the watchful eye of neighbors and police.

What is particularly interesting about Willie’s role in the novel is that his character works as a symbol of the failure of this suburb to squeeze itself into a self-contradictory mold. Linden Hills is self-contradictory because its residents are actually destroying their power—Luther Nedeed’s “beautiful black wad of spit”—by allowing their suburban space to be defined and delineated by white norms. The individual

²⁷ Steering is a practice in which real estate agents help to maintain the homogeneity of neighborhoods by only showing their black clients houses in black neighborhoods (Beuka 195).

²⁸ There are, of course, many suburbs that are primarily black. Suburban Atlanta is one such example.

²⁹ The specifics of this kind of blackness are largely dealt with through allusions to Naylor’s previous novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, published in 1982. Naylor conceived of her first four novels as a set, and as such, each novel draws some of its richness from its association with the others.

inhabitants of Linden Hills lose their power when they allow their suburb supreme agency. The demands of middle-class suburbia require that people like Willie be kept out, and Willie is, in fact, carefully watched during his time in Linden Hills. On one occasion the police are called because Lester and Willie—two “suspicious looking” men—are seen walking on the wrong street. Yet Willie’s status as outsider does more than simply single him out or invite harassment. Because Willie is not from Linden Hills, and therefore not under the same demands to conform to their standards of conduct, he is able to see beyond the façade of Linden Hills in order to tear it down. Had Willie grown up in Linden Hills, or if he had moved there of his own accord and with his own desires to be a part of its success, he would be subject to its power. Since he is an outsider, the regulatory mechanisms that hold others in check do not affect him. An example of this occurs in the scene when Luther brings a cake to Lycentia Parker’s funeral and claims that his wife baked it. The cake is clearly store-bought (it could not be otherwise since Willa is locked in the cellar at the time) but no one registers Luther’s obvious lie except Willie, who does not live in Linden Hills and thus has not been trained to turn away from dangerous details such as this one.

While adherence to a standard of conservative conduct is typical in suburbia, it becomes vital in a place like Linden Hills, because the residents cannot easily move to another suburb if they are evicted from this one. While Luther Nedeed and his ownership applications may control Linden Hills in many ways, the suburb also enacts its own order; conduct is regulated from within and behavioral boundaries are kept in place. The suburb functions as a system of regulatory actions that work to smooth out residents’

sexual, racial, and gender identities in order to maintain traditional domesticity. When Xavier Donnell rejects his love for Roxanne Tilson because she is African American, he does so because he perceives her as a threat to his potential for financial gain and upward mobility. Although he probably would not be permitted to stay in Linden Hills, or to procure a more prestigious address within it, if he married a white woman, Xavier has internalized the belief that marrying someone black will not secure his place within suburbia. In a similar example, Winston Alcott marries a woman, despite being in love with his long-time partner, David, in order to keep his job and his house. Likewise, Reverend Michael T. Hollis's alcoholism is viewed as tragic because it brings about the destruction of his family, and thus the probable loss of his property and standing in the community.

One of the most interesting ways that the novel addresses conformity is through the trope of surveillance on the level of setting. In this text that is invested in the idea that a housing community or a neighborhood can determine a person's desires and behaviors, the layout and functioning of Linden Hills becomes significant. Many critics have discussed the complex ways that Naylor draws inspiration from Dante's *Inferno*, utilizing its themes and images in order to comment on the ramifications of "selling the mirror in your soul" to obtain a piece of the American Dream.³⁰ As Willie and Lester circle, ever deeper, toward the bottom of Linden Hills, they interact with residents who suffer, both to maintain their place in the neighborhood, and because of what they have

³⁰ Virginia C. Fowler's chapter "Selling the 'Mirror in Your Soul': *Linden Hills*," and Catherine C. Ward's essay "Linden Hills: A Modern *Inferno*" provide two of the more comprehensive discussions of Naylor's use of the *Inferno*.

given up in order to live there. While the narrative structure and multiple set pieces clearly seem drawn from the *Inferno*, I propose a more fruitful allusion to Foucault's Panopticon. If the *Inferno* works well when figuring Luther Nedeed as the sole perpetrator of violence and neglect in the text, it also lets the other players off the hook. Viewing Luther as a devil figure is inevitable: his address is 999, or 666 in the upside down world of Linden Hills,³¹ he deals in death as the owner of a funeral home, in his role as undertaker he engages in nefarious acts with bodies, and he employs dark rituals in his attempt to obtain a son who will be his mirror image. However, this conception absolves the rest of the community of the role it plays in maintaining the horror of Linden Hills.

For this reason, it is more useful to view Linden Hills not as the circles of Hell, but as a Panopticon, with Luther Nedeed's house at its center. The Nedeed home—the oldest dwelling in Linden Hills, set at a distance from the other homes, and surrounded by a moat-like lake—sits at the center of the neighborhood. The other houses in the neighborhood are arranged on steeply sloped hillsides and look down on one another and, ultimately, onto Luther's house. As the text notes, Luther is able to look up at all of the houses in the neighborhood, but the other residents cannot see him. In addition to this physical similarity to the arrangement of the Panopticon, Luther is able to access the homes of his residents much as the "supervisor" of the Panopticon is able to see into the cells at any time. As the head of the Tupelo Realty Company, Luther is technically a landlord and all of the residents of Linden Hills are his tenants. This situation permits

³¹ Fowler 64.

him to enter homes and evict tenants at will. Conversely, none of the other residents (until Willie and Lester) are permitted to enter Luther's home. Further, as Lester and Willie move from house to house in the days before Christmas, it is as though they are visiting the cells of the imprisoned and insane. The residents of Linden Hills are presented as so many "madmen" who have altered normal behavior to adhere to the demands of an ever-watching guard. Luther certainly plays the part of this guard, but, as with the Panopticon, the inhabitants have internalized their behavior and have silently agreed to monitor one another. The paranoid, self-imposed behavioral modification created by the Panopticon is at work in Linden Hills in broad ways.

In order to maintain such rigid standards of behavior, it is necessary for Linden Hills to establish its separateness, not only through its reputation but also through its physical arrangement.³² In addition to the trope of the Panopticon, Linden Hills can be read as an encapsulated space that ensnares its inhabitants in a further series of physical markers. The layout of the neighborhood works to keep residents in and visitors out. The first marker that indicates this is the entrance into the neighborhood itself:

Because the cemetery stopped Linden Road at Fifth Crescent Drive, Tupelo Drive could only be entered through the center of Fifth Crescent, and the Tupelo residents built a private road with a flower-trimmed meridian headed by two twelve-foot brick pillars. They then put up a

³² Linden Hills is built as a series of curved roads, beginning at the bottom with Tupelo Drive and moving up, and, ironically, decreasing in prestige, to First through Fifth Crescent Drives.

bronze plaque on the pillars and had the words LINDEN HILLS engraved in deep Roman type. (14-15)³³

Linden Hills immediately announces itself as separate from the spaces around it through its signage. The plaque does not “welcome” outsiders to the neighborhood, and, in fact, does not directly make clear that it *is* a neighborhood (the name being somewhat ambiguous). Rather, the area indicates its exclusivity through its use of towering pillars and carving its name in bronze. Most importantly though, this is a spatial marker that indicates to outsiders that they have left their proper place. The arrangement of the roads themselves also functions in this way, for, as Lester’s friend Norman notes, “everybody knows it’s almost impossible to turn around once you enter Tupelo Drive” (198). Examples such as these indicate that Linden Hills creates a sense of exclusivity through entrapment, and vice versa.

The novel builds on the spatial confinement of Linden Hills, indicated by its funnel-like layout and twisting, gated roads by focusing on domestic confinement. While there are numerous examples in the novel of the ways that the community enforces conformity to stereotypically conservative upper middle-class ideals, the novel’s primary concerns center on the ways that such conformity targets women in the home space. Since the community itself establishes and enforces a code of conduct, everyone is complicit in the entrapment and ultimate deaths of a series of women. Moreover, since the community maintains standards of behavior by watching and surveilling one another, the deaths of women who could have been saved through neighborly intervention

³³ “Bronze,” “pillars,” and “Roman type” are all markers of empire and Western culture, markers that Luther would like to link to his own goals for his society, even if he can not link them to his heritage.

become all the more ironic and tragic. In other words, the watchfulness that maintains rigid boundaries of behavior and expectations of success and, thus, causes these women's deaths, is the very thing that could have saved them. The combination of suburban surveillance and domestic entrapment speaks to a broader tension in the novel, and, in all of the texts in this dissertation, between the longing for domesticity that might be fulfilling to women, and women's recognition of the damaging power of homes controlled by the vision of perfection and female subservience exemplified by Luther Nedeed. Thus, the women in this text, Willa Nedeed in particular, harness the watchfulness of Luther and their neighbors in order to subvert it. By the end of the novel, Laurel Dumont and Willa Nedeed have both killed themselves in spectacular ways. Both women turn to self-destruction after the failure of their attempts to find happiness and self in the domestic sphere. It is significant that neither woman ends her life quietly, both instead finding a final power by enacting their protest on their bodies, and within view of other people.

The most glaring example of regulated domestic conformity is Willa's confinement to the cellar of her house as a punishment for failed maternity. Luther drives Willa and her son into the cellar (a space formerly used for preparing bodies for burial) because Willa's son looks white. Luther believes that his attempts at recreating a son in his own image have failed because he chose the "wrong" woman: "Luther had not followed the pattern of his fathers and married a pale-skinned woman. [...] Luther's wife was better than pale – a dull, brown shadow who had given him a son, but a white son" (18). Nevertheless, he accuses Willa of infidelity, imprisoning her so she will learn to be

“a mother.” Luther enacts hyperbolic regulatory control over his domestic environment because his attempts to control the composition of his family have failed.

Willa’s imprisoning works as the narrative center of the text, appearing and reappearing in between the stories of other Linden Hills occupants. It is also the final revelation of the narrative; Willie and Lester move toward Willa as they slowly make their way to the Nedeed house and “discover” her just as she takes her final stand and confronts Luther with his dead child. Willa’s failed domesticity initially causes her to question her very being. Ultimately, though, her time in the basement gives her access to a shared female history by being a part of a continuum of women similarly, and paradoxically, disembodied by domesticity. This is paradoxical in my view because of the fact that women are traditionally thought to embody the roles of housewife and mother. The house and the work done within it come to define women as extensions of their homes, devoid of more complex ways of defining the self. Willa, and the women with whom she figuratively connects, have been conditioned to view themselves this way. Thus, when their husbands remove their access to domestic work—cooking, cleaning, and mothering—they are stripped of their defining roles, and of selfhood altogether. Once these duties are gone, they become phantoms of their former selves until they assert the power of the body to make personal, complex meaning.

On first reading, Willa’s story of domestic confinement and punishment at the hands of an overbearing patriarch feels familiar, even clichéd. The power of this narrative, interwoven with vignettes of other lives, emerges in the way that it presents both Willa’s suffering and her eventual empowerment as occurring, not by escaping the

house, but by manipulating its ideological tools in order to, quite literally, burn it down. This distinction indicates that the novel is not interested in repudiating the power of home, or even of domestic work. Instead, the novel highlights the tension between the longing for home and the longing for a female individuality that thrives without being consumed by the demands of domesticity. In a powerful invocation of Audre Lorde's famous polemic that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" Naylor explores the repercussions of attempting to do just this (113).³⁴ Willa does not achieve transcendence by recognizing and then rejecting her status as subjugated housewife and mother, but rather by embracing the potential power of such roles in order to establish a new subjectivity. Likewise, Willa is only able to do this once she recognizes her membership in a community of similarly dispossessed women; the hidden testimonies of the previous Nedeed wives build upon one another and feed Willa's own sense of self. Like "The Yellow Wallpaper" before it, *Linden Hills* explores the ways in which women's histories are tied to personal writings and archiving done within the confine of the home, and against patriarchal censure. Such writings subvert patriarchal restrictions governing both writing and the body when confined women choose to embody their histories and act out the records of their lives. Their histories are written on and through the body in a space that has traditionally denied women the power of testimony or subversive embodiment

³⁴ It is important to note that we cannot be sure that Naylor was actually alluding to Lorde's words directly since Lorde's essay was published in *Sister Outsider* in 1984, just a year before *Linden Hills* was published.

Although Willa Nedeed eventually becomes part of this tradition of writing and protest, when she first goes down into the basement, she is concerned only with mothering her young child. She is only able to take stock of her own suffering and its cause after her son is dead. In searching for something in which to wrap her son's body, Willa unearths the possessions of Luwana Packerville, Evelyn Creton Nedeed, and Pricilla McGuire, three generations of Mrs. Luther Nedeeds who went before her. By examining her mothers-in-laws enigmatic accountings of their suffering and disappearance, Willa is able to discern what her own life of subjugation has meant. She comes across Luwana Packerville's things first. This is the oldest record and the most straightforward, consisting of a series of journal entries and letters written on the tissue paper pages between the books of her family Bible. Luwana comes to Luther's house in the 1830s and soon discovers that Luther owns her, that she has no rights to her son, and that her child will one day become her master (117). Her husband, as is the case with all the subsequent Luther Nedeeds, uses Luwana as a procreative tool. Once she has borne him a child, she is no longer of any use to him; the role of primary caretaker shifts from mother to father and Luwana is left purposeless. Luther compounds Luwana's loss of identity when he hires a woman to cook and clean, and forbids Luwana to socialize with other wives and women in the area. Her profound isolation, coupled with the removal of her domestic duties and attachments, strips Luwana of any hold on identity.

In response to this untenable position, Luwana attempts to maintain selfhood by chronicling her thoughts within the pages of her Bible. She splits herself into two entities, one a righteous, proper believer, and one filled with fear and doubt, and begins a

correspondence between these two selves. Luwana perceives that the larger community would condemn any attempts to establish a self outside of the home or to voice dissatisfaction with her home life or her husband publicly. The letters, therefore, become a discursive space within which Luwana attempts to regulate her thoughts and behavior away from the watchful eyes of the community. Luwana ultimately finds letter writing too confining, and seeks a more radical medium through which to make her statement. She stops speaking unless directly called upon to do so and keeps a record of those rare occasions by carving lines “onto [her] chest and stomach” with a hat pin (124). By marking her body, specifically those parts of her body that most clearly link her to motherhood, and by using an implement of female ornamentation to destroy her physical beauty, Luwana takes hold of her master’s tools and utilizes them for her own ends. Moreover, she ensures that each of the 665 marks³⁵ will stay in place by “rub[bing] with black ink until the bleeding stops,” creating a fully embodied form of testimony (124). It could be argued that Luwana’s protest against her silencing simply enacts a further loss of voice, but I would argue that Luwana’s testimony is not unheard during her lifetime but rather unhearable. The message only registers once Willa, a woman who has suffered in similar ways, encounters it.

The testimonies of Evelyn Creton Nedeed and Pricilla McGuire record equally embodied, radical, and silenced rejections of the erasure of women at the hands of patriarchal domesticity. Evelyn’s archive takes the form of cookbooks, records of grocery purchases, and recipes. As Virginia C. Fowler notes, Willa is “blinded by her

³⁵ This is another obvious allusion to the Devil’s 666 and an indication of Luther’s role as a Lucifer figure in the novel. See Catherine C. Ward for further discussion of this point.

own male-inspired assumptions about what constitutes history [and] is unable at first to discover any meaning in Evelyn's recipes, canning lists, and shopping notations," believing them to be mundane accountings of meals prepared and eaten (82). She sees only that Evelyn "cooked as if she were possessed," maniacally cooking huge batches of food only to begin again the next day by substituting or adding ingredients to the original. Evelyn, just like Luwana, is cast aside by her husband, Luther, once she has provided him with an heir. Thinking that she has lost her sexual appeal, she attempts, through her cooking, to win Luther back. Her culinary work becomes subversive when she begins to substitute typical ingredients for those found in black magic. She retools her culinary skills and introduces rarer ingredients such as "powdered dove's heart," "snakeroot," and "shame-weed" to her baking (147). When Evelyn makes this shift, she begins to align herself with a woman-centered tradition of alternative medicine and "root magic." Keith Sandiford discusses her change of tactics in this way: "By resorting to occult practices she most probably inherited from her womenfolk, Evelyn aligns herself with a source of power that circumvents and subverts the secular, material and male rationalist principles of Nedeed dominion" (206).³⁶ This connection is made in the text when Willa remembers that her great-aunt, Miranda Day (the titular character of Naylor's novel *Mama Day*³⁷), told her about shame-weed's powers when Willa was a teenager. Thus, Evelyn's "root work" ties her not only to other women within her own time but to multiple generations of Willa's family. The truth of Evelyn's quest to regain

³⁶ Sandiford's point here is well made, although his use of the word "resorting" indicates a level of derision for those practices traditionally associated with women and female community. He reveals similar sentiments earlier in this essay when he discusses the way Luwana "*resorts* to clandestine journal- and letter-writing" (204, emphasis mine).

³⁷ Published in 1989

Luther's attention would be lost on almost anyone other than Willa. Unable to rouse Luther's affections, Evelyn, like Luwana, enacts her final protest on her body. Turning again to her kitchen, Evelyn creates dishes that fail to nourish. She begins buying large quantities of laxatives that she introduces into the food that she cooks for herself, and eventually ends her life by poisoning herself with vanilla ice cream laced with prussic acid. Evelyn, like Luwana before her, makes her protest against her effacement visible in her body. She denies the precept that her cooking must provide nourishment and pleasure to those who eat it, and inverts this principle by poisoning her body with food.

The final set of documents belongs to Priscilla McGuire and is the most cryptic of all, consisting only of a series of photographs chronicling the growth of her son and the disappearance of Priscilla herself. Unlike the previous collections, there is no writing in this archive save for the word "Me" scrawled across the final photograph. The photo album begins with a set of images of Priscilla as a young, lively woman. She smiles at the camera, and it is obvious to Willa that she "wasn't a Nedeed" (206). The rest of the pictures are taken after her marriage to Luther. The photos are formal portraits, the first showing newly-wed Priscilla sitting in a large chair with her husband Luther's hand resting on her shoulder. In subsequent images, Willa notes that Luther's "hand had finally left her shoulder. Priscilla McGuire was now held down by the child on her lap" (207). Many similar photos follow but it is not until the tenth year of the child's life that Willa "noticed the shadow" cast across Priscilla's body (208). Unaware of her gradual diminishment at the hands of both husband and child, Priscilla has "lean[ed] too closely toward the son, causing herself to be lost in his shadow" (208). The end of the album

shows that Priscilla understands what is happening to her: she is losing her identity under the force of her motherhood.

The final series of images show the same staged portrait, only now Priscilla has no face: “The entire face, the size of a large thumbprint, had been removed. This had been done on purpose. There was no way this wasn’t done on purpose” (249). Willa recognizes the significance of this and knows that it was Priscilla who sought to remove herself from the photos. Sandiford argues that Willa, through translating these documents, “confers value and legitimacy on a set of female experiences commonly defined as madness” (208). And while Willa does have a unique ability to see the value and truth in the documents hidden away in the basement, she does not consciously affirm the actions depicted in them. Throughout her reading, Willa strives to distance herself from Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla. She is “sickened” by Priscilla’s images and resents having to spend her time on “another twisted life” (249). Although it takes Willa’s participation in the kind of humiliation and silencing that the other Nedeed women faced in order for their pain to be accurately interpreted, Willa herself attempts to distance herself as a historian would.³⁸ In claiming that she is different from the women whose archives she has discovered, Willa problematically diminishes their potential power. Willa is still caught up in the allure of traditional domesticity, believing that all she wanted was “a home. A husband. Children. That was all” (204). By contrast, she finds the desires of the Nedeed women simultaneously familiar and “sick”; attempting to

³⁸ Teresa Goddu examines the role of history and autobiography in *Linden Hills*. She argues that there are four kinds of history at work in the text: “Luther Nedeed’s mythic, Daniel Braithwaite’s objective, and Willie Mason’s poetic histories” in addition to “Willa’s revisionary female model” (215).

differentiate her needs from theirs, she reflects, “If there was any sickness, it was in this house, in the air. It was left over from the breaths of those women who had come before her” (204). Willa is unable to see Priscilla’s act of defacement as a resistant one, believing it to be the work of a madwoman. On the contrary however, Priscilla, like Luwana and Evelyn before her, denies Luther’s attempts to create her history in his own image by removing herself from the photographs with the very tools of her oppression: “Cleaning fluid. Bleach. A drop of hot grease” (249).³⁹

It is this ambiguity, the coexistent resistance to dominating domesticity and desire for the security it confers, that makes the ending of the novel so troubling. Though Willa seeks to distance her own torrid emotions from the “madness” she sees in the Nedeed women’s testimonies, she also registers the connection between them and her own situation. After viewing Priscilla McGuire’s missing face, Willa questions her own existence and becomes desperate to confirm it. Throughout the novel Willa has responded to the documents in intellectual and emotional ways, imagining what the women might have been like, and filling in the missing parts of their stories with her own mental creations. It is striking, therefore, that Willa finally seeks to confirm her own existence through her body. Fearful that her own face might have been removed just as the evidence of Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla had been, Willa

reached her hand up and began to touch her own face, her fingers running tentatively across the cheeks and mouth, up the bridge of the nose, and spanning out over the eyes and forehead. She tried to place the curves and

³⁹ The reference to bleach in this quote also refers back to Willa’s own attempts to lighten her skin with bleaching cream.

planes, the shape of the jutting cheekbones and texture of the hair into the hollow of the hand that she brought back and held before her. (267)

But she still does not totally trust such subjective, embodied knowledge to make true meaning for her, thinking that with such methods it “was difficult to keep it all in position” (267). Desiring objectivity, Willa removes the pot of water from the sink—the pot representative of domesticity and the water of Luther’s control over it—and holds it under the light to form a kind of mirror. She is only able to discern a “dim silhouette,” and can only see distinct features when her head is turned in profile; her reflection in the pan of water deprives her of the level of detail she enjoyed when she “touched her face” (267, 268). Willa is still tied to her role as mother and homemaker, and thus relies on what Luther has allowed her (he alone can turn on the water in the basement and Willa is thus forced to gather the water according to his schedule) in order to define her being. The tragedy of this moment is that Willa turns her back on the power of embodied subjectivity she discovers within the pages of the Nedeed women’s documents.

In reading and deciphering such varied records of women’s domestic oppression, Willa holds the power to subvert it. Instead, in one of the most profound moments of self-regulation in the novel, she decides to “rebuild” her old life. It is only after she decides to return to her domestic duties that Naylor reveals her name. But the name that she embraces, Willa Prescott Nedeed, aligns her with her oppressor, and allows her to take on the blame for her subservience. Feeling in her heart that she “was a good mother and a good wife,” she decides that the only reason she is trapped in a basement with her dead son is “because she walked down into [it]. That was simple enough; that was clear”

(279). Willa finds the strength to walk out of the basement by denying that she is a victim, but in doing so, she shifts the blame, not only to herself, but to the other Nedeed women as well. In her final act of separation from them, Willa claims her right to “walk back up” the stairs by first “keeping house” (280, 289). This moment in the text is read by many as a rebirth,⁴⁰ and Naylor is fairly explicit about it being so, describing a moment of waking from sleep as an awakening into “self-determination,” “her brain, heart, hands, and feet [...] programmed to a purpose” (289). But Willa’s body is now “a mere shelter” and the description of her “purpose” as being “programmed” speaks to the complete erasure of individual will. The very fact that Willa sees her actions as self-directed, powerful rejections of patriarchal constraint reveals the power with which the regulatory mechanisms of patriarchal, suburban culture work. Agency lies with the cultural norms that drive Willa to renounce the other Nedeed women and to view their actions as a “sickness” that threatens to infect her (204). Willa may be acting in her individual self-interest, but she does so only within the strict confines of the gender norms defined for her by her environment. Moreover, by coupling Willa’s return to domesticity to her subsequent madness and death, the novel suggests that self-imposed adherence to the demands of suburban domesticity is far more damaging than control that comes from an outside source.

The meaning of this moment in the novel, as well as Willa’s subsequent cleaning and finally her burning of the house, has been much debated. Sandiford reads Willa’s decisions to take up housekeeping as “a passive yet potent method of resistance” but

⁴⁰ See Fowler and Andrews particularly.

only in that she is “exploit[ing] her madness as a political response to patriarchal terror” (207). Yet, having turned her attentions away from other women, Willa must now depend on the assistance of men to fulfill her “political” project. The connection between Willa’s name and her agency—as Sandiford notes “Willa equals will, resolve” (207)—is more complicated than it might initially appear. Although Willa finally refuses to become like the other Nedeed women when she rises up from her bed and emerges from the basement to “literally bring down the house of patriarchy” (Homans 172), she escapes her prison by repudiating the Nedeed women’s stories, and by embracing the patriarchy that initially entrapped her. Indeed, Margaret Homans argues that Willa’s success is less her own doing than the result of Willie’s need to discover the secret of Willa and her name. She contends that Willie “by his name seems to be an extension of [Willa’s] will” (171). Further, the truth of Willa’s escape from the basement is that she would have found the door still locked if Willie and Lester had not been in the house and accidentally unlatched it.

After cleaning the kitchen, Willa confronts Luther with the body of his dead son and, locking in an embrace with Luther, inadvertently lights the house on fire, burning it down as the whole of Linden Hills watches. Willa exerts her will in this scene only by refusing to let Luther push her back down into the basement; the fire itself starts when Willa’s bridal veil/burial shroud for her son touches an ember on the hearth and catches fire. As Teresa Goddu argues, “Willa neither acts willfully in burning down the house of patriarchy nor lives to tell her story. Willa’s self-determination, like all female history in this book, ends in self-destruction and disappearance” (225). But how are we to

understand the ambiguity of an ending that finds both patriarchy and feminist protest engulfed and silenced? Larry R. Andrews, recognizing that “Willa’s journey to self-discovery is a dead end,” nevertheless argues that she has “achieved selfhood and poetic justice” by the end of the novel and that “her power [...] is hair-raising” (294, 295). Similarly, Homans sees Willa’s power as wasted because her destruction of “the house of patriarchy [...] is an act of negation [...] since it destroys her even as she destroys it” (172). The concern that each of these critics raises is that Naylor creates a narrative that presents a portrait of female subversion and power but fails to articulate a world in which subversive women might exercise their power. All of the women in the novel suffer at the hands of oppressive, patriarchal domesticity, suggesting that “The evil of the world [Naylor] creates in the novel is so absolute that it can only be destroyed; it can never be redeemed” (Fowler 88). I would argue, however, that there is hope amidst the ruin at the end of the novel.

As I previously discussed, one of the most insidious aspects of the suburbs is the way that they encourage surveillance and apathy. Every member of Linden Hills watches every other member for signs of aberration, for justification to have them removed. But they are simultaneously invested in maintaining their own privacy and distance and, as such, do not intervene in the suffering of their neighbors. As an outsider, Willie is able to see behind the façade of gentility that the neighborhood seeks to project; he is also able to feel empathy and the desire to help when he sees someone suffering or in danger. The novel’s final scene showcases all of this: unable to pull Willa out of the burning house, Willie and Lester try to arouse the attention of the closest neighbors. Unable to do so,

Willie finally, in his desperation to be heard, breaks one of their windows with a rock. But as Willie and Lester watch the “Faces appearing and disappearing – the unopened doors. The lights going off, the draperies parting. The lights going off, the shades going up. The lights going off . . . going off . . . going off” they realize that the neighborhood sees the conflagration and has no intentions of helping (302). This moment is a troubling one because it seems a culmination of the suburban impulse toward self-preservation and isolation. An alternative way to read this ending would be as a first step toward autonomy on the part of the community by allowing Luther Nedeed and his legacy to go up in flames. Moreover, this final scene suggests the possibility that Willie might continue Willa’s protest against confinement in her absence. When Willie sees Willa’s dirt-smeared and disheveled form walk into the living room, the embodied awareness of the horror of Willa’s situation is transferred from Willa to Willie. He becomes voiceless, “need[ing] desperately to open his suffocating windpipes and scream so he could breathe again,” and remains that way as Luther pushes him and Lester out the door (299).⁴¹ He echoes her pain again when he responds with tears to his helplessness in the face of the fire. While this is not as satisfying as it might be—it is disappointing that Willa is not able to broadcast her protest herself—there is some consolation in the fact that Willie does not participate in the structures of gender norming or suburban silence that facilitate the Nedeed women’s confinement and control. Willie’s transience marks him as a nonparticipant in the politics of the domestic sphere just as his willingness to display his horror in public reveals his disdain toward the self-regulatory demands of suburbia. Such

⁴¹ In effect, this is an inversion of the bodily silencing Luther attempts when he tries to push Willa back down into the basement.

disregard allows him to exit the final scene, hand in hand with Lester, as a potential embodiment of commingled gendered subjectivity.⁴² Ultimately, however, Willie's existence, and the perceived necessity of a male voice to interpret and disseminate Willa's story, severely undermines the subversive power of her protest. Similar unwillingness to allow women the final and authoritative word on their own actions is at work in *The Virgin Suicides*.

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

We haven't kept our tomb sufficiently airtight, and our sacred objects are perishing.
— Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*

If *Linden Hills* critiques the American Dream by creating a suburb that is less than completely realistic, Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) reveals the dangerous conformity of suburbia through a suburb that is entirely familiar.⁴³ The novel is set in the 1970s and tells the story of four adolescent boys and their attempt to uncover and understand the secret of the Lisbon family and its tragedy. Eugenides uses an unusual first-person plural narration that combines the thoughts of the boys into a single consciousness that, Debra Shostak argues, "causes them incidentally to construct a

⁴² Luke Bouvier argues that Willie "in a certain sense appears on the borderline between masculine and feminine; he is defensive and somewhat secretive about his poetry because it seems 'queer' and makes him look like a 'sissy,' and he usually lies about having wrapped his own presents because it looks 'like something a woman would do'" (147). This suggestion is supported further by the similarity between Willie and Willa's names, a point that many critics have noted.

⁴³ Critic Gordon Burn notes the familiarity of this setting in this way: "The setting—curtain-twitching, sprinkler-on-the-lawn suburbia—and the cadence, suggesting both superciliousness and nostalgia, shifting effortlessly from the domestic to the visionary, are as familiar as the pop classics the Lisbon sisters and the boys of the neighbourhood, unrequitedly panting after them, play each other down the phone" (22).

history of their own adolescent selves” (808). The story is told from the perspective of grown men looking back on a confused and crisis-filled year in their teens; the narrator remembers the five Lisbon sisters as a mixture of memory, myth, and “fact” gleaned from interviews, artifacts, and newspaper clippings. For the narrator, the girls’ deaths are what Adam Kelly refers to as a “moment of decision,” a potentially disruptive act that, for the narrator, represents the end of his innocence and of a way of life.⁴⁴ The novel combines the narrator’s obsession with watching the girls with a largely unconscious recognition of encroaching urbanity, the loss of community, and the death of the landscape of their suburban childhood.

Because the boys live on the same street as the girls, their neighborhood plays a central role in the narrative. The neighborhood is a Michigan suburb that is slowly being defoliated by Dutch elm disease. By the end of the novel, the elms have been removed, and the narrator realizes the truth of his neighborhood: “We got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden, and the old ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us feel unique” (243). The uniformity of the neighborhood had previously been unnoticed, but now the Lisbon house lends it an air of mystery and darkness. Although the suburb of *Suicides* is spatially and physically typical, Eugenides utilizes images more macabre than mundane in order to centralize the dangerous power of suburban domesticity. The most powerful of these images involve the Lisbon house which is

⁴⁴ Kelly works with William Gibson’s and Frederick Jameson’s idea of the “moment when it all changed” which suggests that postmodern texts attempt to locate “the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same” (Jameson, qtd. in Kelly 314). Working with Lawrence Buell’s idea of the “observer-hero narrative,” Kelly argues that *The Virgin Suicides* is particularly interested in representing cultural moments of change, and of shifts in how to represent such change.

described as a dead thing enveloped by “soft decay;” the house appears “dim and unhealthy” and is thought of as “one big coffin,” (160, 145, 163).⁴⁵ In Gothic style, these images suggest a corporeal entity whose state alters in tandem with its occupants. Houses are the central symbol of suburbia and stand for the comfort, security, and safety of a place in which everyone agrees to behave in a certain way and keep their domestic space appropriately cared for. Since the Lisbon house signals death, rot, and disease it is in clear violation of suburban regulations. As long as the Lisbon house continues its slow collapse, the Lisbons will be singled out for their deviance and will be subject to the scrutiny and castigation of the neighborhood.

The narrative begins by revealing the fact that one year after the death of the youngest sister, Cecilia, the four other Lisbon sisters will take their lives together.⁴⁶ The first scene focuses on the horror as well as the routine of paramedics being called to the Lisbon house: “the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope” (3). While the tragedy of this event is profound, and the understanding of it the driving force of the novel,⁴⁷ there is more lurking in this scene than the deaths of four sisters. Further along in this first scene, we find the first description of the Lisbon house:

⁴⁵ As a number of reviews of the novel have noted, the pleasure in reading the text largely lies in the richness of its language. This richness is particularly noticeable in the descriptions of the Lisbon girls and their world. They are described in vivid detail rife with nostalgia and fantasy that reveals the fact that the boys see the Lisbon sisters as idealized creatures rather than real people.

⁴⁶ In truth, the final Lisbon sister, Mary, does not succeed in killing herself that day, although the narrator notes that “everyone felt otherwise” (219). She lives on for “more than a month” before ending her life with an overdose of sleeping pills. In the film version, all of the girls succeed in killing themselves on the same night.

⁴⁷ Nearly all reviews of *The Virgin Suicides*, as well as the majority of the critical work on the text focus on the ways in which the collective narrator searches for the meaning behind the Lisbon sisters’ deaths, and, thus the meaning of their own lives.

the paramedic “was carrying the heavy respirator and cardiac unit past the bushes that had grown monstrous and over the erupting lawn, tame and immaculate thirteen months earlier when the trouble began” (3). The combined discussion of the deaths that occurred within the Lisbon house, and the overgrown, “monstrous” vegetation surrounding the house work together to establish a sense of mystery surrounding not only the Lisbon sisters’ deaths, but the house itself. The indication that the lawn had been “tame and immaculate” *before* “all the trouble began” suggests that the house wielded the power to influence its occupants even before the first suicide pushed the family into understandable mourning and the house into neglect. For much of the novel, the physical state of the house seems to reflect the psychological states of those within it. It is never entirely clear if the house falls into decay because its occupants are too depressed to care for it, or if the house itself is the catalyst for the Lisbons’ suffering and consequential neglect of their house. Regardless, the fact that the house was, at one point, under control—well maintained in accordance to neighborhood norms—reveals that the house, much like the deceptively healthy looking elms that shade it, is infected with an invisible and deadly force. Cecilia’s death, therefore, does not so much cause the trouble to begin in the Lisbon home as it reveals the trouble lying dormant in suburbia at large. While the narrator looks to the Lisbon girls’ deaths to explain the loss of innocence within their suburb, Eugenides’ project is more interested in the fact that the conformity and entrapment of the suburbs has always done violence to women.

Descriptions of the house as it falls into disrepair reveal the Lisbons’ psychological withdrawal from their suburban community, but they also, and more

importantly, highlight the Lisbons' deviance. With its early focus on the details of death, and more significantly, taboo, self-imposed death, and the comingled discussion of controlled nature reclaiming its wildness, the novel foregrounds its interest in deviant gender behavior and deviant domesticity. While the girls live right across the street from, and go to school with, the narrator, in many ways the Lisbon sisters exist in another world. Their strict Catholic mother, who determines in which activities the girls will participate, rules the girls' lives. Her control over them—restricting dating and limiting their television choices to educational programming—initially seems well meaning and benign. Eventually, however, it becomes clear that the girls are most hampered by the fact that they are not allowed to live their lives as other young girls do. Mrs. Lisbon's regulations become more confining after Cecilia's death and, after Lux breaks curfew (after going to the Homecoming dance and staying out all night with Trip Fontaine), the girls are taken out of school and confined to their house full-time. With nowhere to go and nothing to do, the girls slowly get lost within their house. They stop showering as often as they should, eat food directly from the can, and leave discarded meals all over the house. The irony of this story of girls trapped in a house gone feral is that their house is initially described as a "comfortable suburban home" (5). As I discussed earlier, the primary function of suburbia is to eradicate difference and, by doing so, to create a sense of safety and belonging. Houses are symbols of proper domesticity, and a way for neighbors to display their adherence to the norms of their community. Therefore, when the Lisbons forsake appropriate domestic rituals, and particularly when evidence of this becomes visible in the neglect of their house, they inadvertently court heightened levels

of surveillance and judgment.⁴⁸ Surveillance is a prominent trope in the novel, and can be understood in terms of gender development and regulation when the boys watch the Lisbon girls. I would argue, however, that the clear connections of the boys' gaze to gender norming can be expanded to encompass the regulatory behavior common to suburbs in general. The fact that girls are the object of norming in this text is less a result of the boys' adolescent fantasies than it is of a suburban landscape whose primary inhabitants are women, and that strictly confines women spatially and psychically.

The novel's first scene is one of disturbance and watchfulness in which the narrator, one of the neighborhood boys who come to define themselves in relation to the Lisbons and their suffering, recounts the aftermath of the Lisbon sisters' suicides while watching from his bedroom window. This scene introduces the Lisbon sisters as the objects of the novel, while also suggesting the ways in which the boys' surveillance of the girls will come to define both groups. The act of surveillance is a normal one in this novel, and while the boys are the most invested in watching the girls, the whole neighborhood keeps an eye on the Lisbon house. This fact is particularly evident in Sofia Coppola's 1999 film version of *The Virgin Suicides*.⁴⁹ Coppola centralizes the prevalence of watching in a multitude of shots filmed through windows, curtains, shutters, and the boys' telescope. Early in the film, shortly after the Lisbons bring

⁴⁸ To some extent, a family like the Lisbons would already have been singled out because of their religious difference. While it is unclear if the Lisbons are the only Catholics in the neighborhood, they are the only family that goes to church. The narrator notes that their weekly church visit became a ritualized moment of watching for the boys in the neighborhood: "None of us went to church, so we had a lot of time to watch them, the two parents leached of color, [...] and then the five glittering daughters in their homemade dresses, all lace and ruffle, bursting with their fructifying flesh" (8). The combination of chasteness and sexuality seen here is common throughout the text.

⁴⁹ While the novel and the film are narratively very similar, the film presents the themes of spatial confinement in visually heightened ways that are interesting for this dissertation.

Cecilia home after her first suicide attempt, a series of shots follow the girls as they exit the family car and enter the house. The boys sit on the curb across the street and watch as the girls exit the car; the film pauses on each sister as the narrator announces her name and age, which are written in graphic bubble letters above her head. While this information differentiates the sisters, the narrator speaks of them for the remainder of the scene as though they were one entity, or at least interchangeable, marveling that “Mrs. Lisbon and Mr. Lisbon, our math teacher, could produce such beautiful creatures.”

Throughout the novel and film, the girls are presented as profoundly girlish and represent, for the boys, girl-ness rather than individual young women. The rest of the neighborhood seems to view them in similar terms, as they watch their comings and goings and reflect on whether it is “the mother’s fault” that “that girl” wanted to kill herself. Shortly after the girls are introduced, the camera peers out from between the wooden blinds of the house across the street. This shot is accompanied by the voice of a woman talking on the telephone to a neighborhood friend about the near-suicide. The scene does not initially include visuals of the women who watch and gossip about the Lisbons, focusing instead on Cecilia and Mrs. Lisbon as the objects of the women’s surveillance and scorn. These women feel they have the right to watch the Lisbons and to speculate about the cause of their misfortune. They conclude that “that girl [Cecilia] didn’t want to die” she just “wanted out of that house” and “out of that decorating scheme.” As women who properly adhere to the demands of suburban normality, these neighbors position themselves as the rightful sentinels of the Lisbon house. Moreover,

by sharing their disapproval of the Lisbons' parenting skills *and* their decorating aesthetic, they reinforce standards of gendered behavior and domestic practice.

The Lisbons fail to properly adhere to domestic rituals in a number of other ways. Generally, the demands of domestic conformity appear harmless enough—keep up your house, rake your leaves, etc.—but they actually function as a means by which the neighborhood monitors its residents. Living in close proximity to one another allows for open and sanctioned forms of surveillance. The most prevalent of these in the text surrounds the rituals of home maintenance. The novel opens in the midst of Michigan's fish fly season, and by the time Cecilia succeeds in committing suicide by impaling herself on the wrought-iron fence below her bedroom window, the fish flies have died and their dead bodies cover the neighborhood. The men and boys begin sweeping their cars and houses free of the insects, but the Lisbons, so new to their tragedy, do not join in the work. However, after the boys have finished with their own houses, one of their fathers, Mr. Buell, sends his son over to the Lisbons to sweep their house. The narrator notes that "It wasn't odd for [Mr. Buell] to tell Chase to start sweeping the Lisbons' house, [...]. Because Mr. Lisbon only had daughters, boys and men had gone over in the past to help him drag away lightning-struck limbs" (57). This moment of neighborly understanding and willingness to cover over Mr. Lisbon's neglect stands in sharp contrast to the neighborhood response some months later when the Lisbons ignore their falling leaves. As the whole street "began raking in military ranks, heaping piles in the street," the Lisbon house remains silent (91). When Mr. Lisbon chooses not to participate in this neighborhood ritual on "the appropriate Saturday," his action is

noticed, but more importantly, his house is further singled out (92). While most of the houses in the neighborhood show their “scrubbed grass” proudly (91), the Lisbon house, already showing signs of disrepair, is now the only one covered in debris. The real significance of this act is only seen later, when the leaves from the Lisbon lawn begin to drift into other yards. Whereas the neighbors had once been more than happy to lend a neighborly hand to the grieving family, they now see the Lisbons’ loose leaves as invasive. They resent having to gather up leaves that are not theirs and watch as the rain turns the Lisbon lawn into “a field of mud” (93).⁵⁰ Moments such as this one indicate the importance of adhering to standards of conduct as they are defined along suburban norms. Mr. Lisbon is expected to participate in the rituals involving the upkeep of the house and lawn, and when he does not, the neighbors notice his lapse, and watch even more closely.

As a discussion of deviance in this text makes clear, there is a significant difference between the response to deviance in the black suburb of *Linden Hills* and the white suburb of *The Virgin Suicides*. In *Linden Hills*, deviance is easily identifiable as the nearby Putney Wayne. The Linden Hills community comes together in their opposition to the housing projects slated to be built in view of Linden Hills, fearing that when built they will “get an army of them [poor blacks] right across Wayne Avenue. Practically in our backyards. So you can kiss your safe streets good-bye” (Naylor 133). The residents of Linden Hills can see and name that which is outside of the norm and

⁵⁰ Mr. Lisbon further indicates the extent to which he is out of step with his neighborhood duties when he puts up his Christmas lights after the holidays are already over and leaves them up, some of them blinking, all winter.

actively work to keep it out. Excluding black deviance is so crucial to them that they are willing to do business with a notoriously racist Citizens Alliance group that Willie says is “the Ku Klux Klan without a Southern accent” (134). The residents of Linden Hills so utterly fear being associated with the poor blacks of Putney Wayne that they would risk their greater rights in order to keep the impoverished out. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the poverty of the city is an unknown and unseen entity that haunts but does not invade the suburb. The deviance of urban space and of the working class is too far away to be a helpful marker of what to guard against, and so suburbanites need to locate it within their neighborhood. The girls, then, function as scapegoats, and their visible deviance allows others’ faults to remain hidden. Since the rest of the neighborhood can point to the Lisbon household as a site of death, self-inflicted violence, deviant sexual behavior (Lux’s affairs on the roof), and failed domesticity, their own flaws pale in comparison. The Lisbons are, therefore, necessary because without them, there be no one to watch, to gossip about, or to condemn. The girls’ visible deviance allows others’ faults to remain hidden. It is for this reason that the girls are allowed to stay in the community—as opposed to Linden Hills where you must conform or leave—even though they are not normal. They are not saved from their situation because there is a general fear of engaging deviance too closely. Hence, the neighborhood surveils them even while they shy away from interacting with the Lisbons directly.⁵¹

⁵¹ The boys who watch the Lisbon girls are anomalous in the novel in their desire to be physically near the Lisbons. Further, other than the family priest, they appear to be the only ones who want to help the girls out of their entrapment and out of their grief. Their desires are, of course, idealistic and self-promoting in that they allow the boys to imagine themselves as the girls’ rescuers.

Throughout the novel, women are denied access to alternative domestic situations, or to the freedom that mobility might afford, and therefore respond to their entrapment by doing violence to themselves, namely, by committing suicide. Such actions are powerful not simply because they free women from the domestic space but because their violence creates the potential for them to take control of their stories. While it is certainly arguable that being limited to suicide as the only available recourse to entrapment might not qualify as empowerment, it is the events that lead up to the final destructive act and the motives behind it that allow these young women's deaths to be viewed as productive rather than reductive. As with *Linden Hills*, the physical spaces of domesticity are significant in *The Virgin Suicides* in the ways that they limit and define women. But, in many ways, domesticity looks and works differently for women in the two texts. In *Linden Hills*, the domestic is tied to being a wife, a mother, and a homemaker. In *The Virgin Suicides*, none of these things are expected of, or viewed as appropriate for, the Lisbon sisters. In order to understand the ways in which domesticity is being critiqued in this text, it is necessary to understand what domesticity means for the Lisbon girls, or, more generally, the way it functions for girls as opposed to women. The home should be a safe space, a space in which to be nurtured and cared for until such time as the girls are prepared to move into their own domestic spaces. But the home proves to be unsafe right from the beginning when Cecilia attempts suicide in the bathtub. The house is further proven deficient when Cecilia jumps to her death out of her bedroom window. The house fails to keep Cecilia sheltered and it will ultimately fail to keep the other Lisbon sisters contained. But even before the older sisters take their own

lives, outsiders invade their domestic space. After Cecilia's first suicide attempt, and again after her death, paramedics, neighborhood boys, and the family priest come to the house and witness moments that should be kept private.⁵² The house's "growing shabbiness" attracts reporters and the "righteous indignation" of neighbors who feel that they "can't just stand by and let [the] neighborhood go down the toilet" (93, 94). As the intense levels of neighborhood surveillance reveal, the Lisbon house is *not* private, and, thus, not a safe space within which to await adulthood. For the narrator, who makes it his adolescent-life goal to gain entrance to the house and to unearth its secrets, the house is not a shelter at all, but rather a collection of openings to be breached.

In many instances, the narrator describes the house in corporeal terms. Such transfiguration allows him to experience the girls in more fully embodied ways, something that is less possible if he only *watches* them. For example, the narrator describes the Lisbon house, and particularly the girls' rooms, as rife with "the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together" (9). Their scent fills the air of their rooms, and eventually spills out onto the lawn and sidewalks of the neighborhood. After the girls are taken out of school and forbidden to leave the house, the house begins to give off an odor "so thick it seemed liquid" (165). The smell reminds the boys of "bad breath, cheese, milk, tongue film, but also the singed smell of drilled teeth," and an older boy defines the odor as "'the smell of trapped beaver'" (165). This scent is paradoxically

⁵² For example, when the family priest, Father Moody, comes to visit the family after Cecilia's death, he witnesses the girls' wet laundry air-drying in their bathroom: "he saw shirts and pants and underthings draped over the shower curtain" (50). He also steps into their bedroom and finds them together in a pile on the floor and thinks, "they were having some kind of slumber party. They had pillows all over" (51). The priest invades the girls' most private spaces and views their most intimate belongings, even going so far as to note their smell, saying that "it was unmistakable: they hadn't bathed" (52).

alluring to the boys, causing them to “suck in the aroma like mother’s milk,” but it is also the surest sign of the house’s and the girls’ decline. Being able to breathe in the life of the house allows the narrator access to that which he cannot touch: the girls. The smell of the house is linked to living things gone sour, to spoilage, and to damp darkness. The house takes on these odors—implied to be the natural odors of women when they are kept confined—only after the girls are closed up in it. The girls’ imprisonment transforms the house into a dying thing, and the space within which the girls are kept begins to decay and turn wild: “kids found congealed bowls of spaghetti, empty tin cans, as though Mrs. Lisbon had stopped cooking for the girls and they lived by foraging” (147). Toward the end of the text, when the boys come to the house intending to whisk the girls away to sunny Florida, they discover that the overpowering smell does not emanate from the girls alone, but from the mingling of the girls and the house. It is “the smell of wet plaster, drains clogged with the endless tangle of the girls’ hair, mildewed cabinets, leaking pipes” and speaks to the narrator of a house that no one tends to, and that has stopped providing shelter to those who live in it (209). A domestic space is meant to protect its inhabitants from the dangerous effects of the weather, and organic matter beyond its walls, but the Lisbon house loses this distinction when it shifts from a space of protection to one of imprisonment.

While the basement in *Linden Hills* acts as a mere repository for the Nedeed wives’ secrets which become a source of power for Willa, the Lisbon house fluctuates according to the state of mind of the girls within it. However, this is a text that goes beyond the commonplace notions of women trapped in the domestic sphere, in the ways

that the girls penetrate the boundaries of their homes in order to act out in the interstitial spaces that surround it. These moments reveal anxieties surrounding women's power both to move beyond the domestic sphere and to rebel against their situations in visible, embodied ways. Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese eventually harness the power of their domestic space in order to enact their final protest against their imprisonment, but for much of the novel, they must leave the space of the house in order to speak out. The first of the girls to defy the boundaries of the home is Cecilia. When Cecilia succeeds in killing herself, she does so by jumping from her bedroom window and onto the point of a wrought-iron fence that separates the Lisbons' flower garden from the open space of the lawn. The daring of this act is that it takes place during a party thrown in her honor, insuring that multiple people will witness her defiled body. The fence itself is significant in the way that it represents the way that Cecilia and her act straddle the boundary between private, domestic space, and public space.

While the Lisbon lawn may not seem like public space, both the novel and the film indicate that this is the case. Despite the fact that Cecilia jumps from her own bedroom window, concerned parents throughout the neighborhood worry that their “kids could jump on it too” (53), and in a vain attempt to eradicate the cause of the tragedy, a virtual platoon of fathers gathers to remove the fence. This group does not include the Lisbons; they do not even come out of the house until the fence is gone. Cecilia's act so profoundly disturbs the neighborhood's understanding of the world that they attempt to reorder it by reclaiming the means and the space of Cecilia's death. In the process of removing the fence—something that the neighborhood men fail to do,

eventually calling in a professional to finish the job—the Lisbons' front lawn is torn apart. The narrator notes with amazement that the circle of parents watching the fence as it is dragged away seem uncharacteristically calm about the destruction. The narrator interprets this as a sign of the parents' true values, stating that "We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in, and that for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn't give a damn about lawns" (55). And while this moment does indicate a lack of concern with the aesthetics of lawns, it actually confirms the neighborhood's need to adhere to the standards that lawns and crabgrass removal merely symbolize. As the scene plays out, the film shows a group of women and children gathered on the Lisbon lawn passing out drinks and discussing the Lisbons' tragedy. On one level, the women are amusing themselves with the spectacle of "lawyers, doctors, and mortgage bankers locked arm in arm in the trench," but, more importantly, they stand as guardians of normality. By killing herself in public, Cecilia destroys the boundary between public and private space and allows for neighborhood-sanctioned surveillance of the Lisbon house.

The very fact that the girls are under constant surveillance, by their mother as well as members of the neighborhood, lends power to their attempts to defy their domestic entrapment through embodied protest. Just as Cecilia's body on a fence spoke visualizes her protest, various other moments in the novel similarly engender dissent by engaging the body in radical acts outside the restrictive boundaries of the house. The most significant moment of radical engagement of marginal space occurs when Lux begins having sex on the roof of her house. These acts are troubling ones, and even the

boys who watch her through their binoculars, who see her as “a carnal angel,” recognize that “It was crazy to make love on the roof at any time, but to make love on the roof in winter suggested derangement, desperation, self-destructiveness far in excess of any pleasure snatched beneath the dripping trees” (149-150). Yet the boys seem to miss the point of these actions, caught up as they are in *their own* pleasure in watching Lux on the roof. Lux’s motives confuse the boys, but her actions manipulate them as they watch her. Therefore, while it is impossible to view Lux’s behavior as positive, it is my assertion that the public nature of her actions affords them a subversive potential. At this point in the novel Lux and her sisters have been taken out of school and confined to their house. Earlier violations of house rules indicate that Lux has considered flight, but always returns home. Unlike Willa Nedeed, who is locked in her basement, the Lisbon girls are physically confined only insofar as their parents forbid their movement outside of the house, and the girls agree to these rules. As the boys note, “From what we could tell, she didn't leave the house. She didn't even leave at night, sneaking out to do it in a vacant lot or down by the lake, but preferred to make love on the premises of her confinement” (146). When Lux takes men to the roof, and “makes love” with them there, she does so in the knowledge that she is being watched, and that she might get caught. Moreover, this space merges Lux’s need for home and her need for freedom. While she could meet the boys in other, safer places, Lux attempts literally to rise above the limits of her domestic confinement by going to the roof. However, the roof is also a space that is open to the weather and to the elements, and therefore a wilder, more primal space than the interior of the house would be. She goes to the roof in the cold and in the rain, and the

narrator imagines her with “her feet snagged in the gutter, [...] a hand steadying itself against the chimney” (147). Lux boldly breaches numerous boundaries—of space, of propriety, of safety—when she has sex with older men on the roof, in full view of the boys who watch her through their binoculars.

Further moments in which the girls breach boundaries and engage marginal spaces, such as when Bonnie prays on her front lawn, or when the girls protect their doomed elm tree by surrounding it and linking arms, point to the significance of embodied protest against domestic confinement in the novel. In all of these moments, the girls combine notions of virginal martyrdom and physicality. When men arrive to cut down the elm tree, the girls run out and surround the tree, “linking arms in a daisy chain” and embracing the tree, “pressing their cheeks against the trunk” (181). Their action is a significant one, not because it saves the elm—it does not—but because of the way that it points to the power of female bodily display. To the narrator, the girls are acting out a heroic rescue of Cecilia’s favorite tree, ducking under buzzing chain saws and standing off grown men in their desire to pay homage to Cecilia. But it is the visibility of bodies out of bounds that becomes central. The film heightens the brazen and physical nature of this protest against the violation of their home space by having the girls face their observers rather than face the tree as they do in the novel. Further, while the novel notes that two of the girls had shoes on but Bonnie and Lux were barefoot, the film extends their bareness by dressing them in nightgowns. Neighbors gather to watch events unfold, and a news reporter soon arrives on-scene hoping to get a shot of “the girls in their

nighties,” recognizing, perhaps, the way in which the nightgowns evoke both vulnerability and sexuality.

The final and most radical moment of protest is, of course, the joint suicide at the end of the text. The suicides similarly combine conceptions of the girls as helpless victims in need of rescue and sexual beings that the boys obsess over and want to connect with physically. Toward the end of the text, the Lisbon girls contact the boys by leaving a series of notes and laminated cards of the Virgin Mary for the boys to find. These notes are brief, but seem to indicate that the girls are truly seeking a connection with, and help from, the boys. After receiving a note from Lux that instructs the boys to “Tell Trip I’m over him,” the boys find other letters that tell them to “Watch for our lights” (192). The boys follow this exciting, if perplexing, series of communication by calling the girls on the phone, a move that “was so simple it took a week to come up with” (193). However, when they succeed in contacting the girls they discover that they do not recognize them any more. Expecting a revelatory experience that will bring them closer to the girls and closer to understanding them, they find that the girls are farther away than they had thought. When the Lisbon sister who answers the phone offers her “tentative,” “crippled” hello, the boys find that “the voice didn’t jog [their] memories. It sounded—perhaps because the speaker was whispering—irreparably altered, diminished, the voice of a child fallen down a well. We didn’t know which girl it was, and didn’t know what to say. Still, we hung on together—her, them, us” (194). Despite their failure to “know” the girls immediately, they forge a connection with them by playing records over the phone. Unable to speak straightforwardly, they communicate through song

lyrics. But even in this the Lisbon sisters and the neighborhood boys have different motives and seem to be speaking past one another. While the boys choose “love songs,” the girls play songs that the boys interpret as “throb[ing] with secret pain” (197). Since the reader is never privy to the girls’ point of view, we are forced to interpret the girls’ emotions through the boys’ skewed reports. While they are sincere in their desire to help the girls, their motives are deeply colored by their sense of themselves as heroic figures. They view themselves as the girls’ only hope and justify their obsessions by wondering “Who else did [the girls] have to turn to? Not their parents. Nor the neighborhood. Inside their house they were prisoners; outside, lepers. And so they hid from the world, waiting for someone—for us—to save them” (199). The irony of this assessment is that the girls ultimately prove that they are the ones with agency in this situation, and that they have been using the boys rather than depending upon them for rescue.

When the phone calls with the girls come to an abrupt halt, the boys suffer through a brief period of detachment and imagine how they might rescue the girls by digging a tunnel under their house. Eventually, though, the sisters contact them again. After watching the girls fill a trunk in apparent preparation for travel, the boys receive a final piece of correspondence: “The last note, written on the back of a laminated picture of the Virgin, arrived in Chase Buell’s mailbox on June 14. It said simply: ‘Tomorrow. Midnight. Wait for our signal’” (201). When they see the signal, three blinks of a flashlight at the girls’ bedroom window, the boys move with a purpose that reveals a heightened sense of their importance. They “advanced on the house,” “crawling army-style,” and move “in single file, like paratroopers” (205). Even as the narrators believe

that the girls have been “waiting for someone—for us—to save them,” this scene reveals that the boys’ deeper desire is to overtake the girls (199). Lux seems aware of this when, after letting the boys inside the house, she distracts their attention from the suicidal efforts of her sisters by feigning sexual interest in one of the boys. As she unbuckles his belt, and slides down his zipper, the narrator recalls the way that “Even though she was doing it to Chase Buell, we could all feel Lux undoing us, reaching out for us and taking us as she knew we could be taken” (211). In this moment, just as in her final suicide, she “undoes” the boys by undermining their sense of the Lisbon girls’ stories and their fates. When the boys discover that the girls have not been waiting for them at all, but have called them to their house in order to witness their deaths, the boys’ visions of themselves as rescuers is shattered by the comingling of their desire to save and desire to consume. When Lux leaves the boys in the living room and none of the sisters comes out to meet the boys, they go to the basement to see if anyone is there. They enter the scene of Cecilia’s year-old party, now decayed and flooded. As Chase dances in the ankle-deep water, he imagines holding one of the Lisbon girls in his arms and tells the others, “These girls make me crazy. If I could just feel one of them up just once” (215). At this moment, the boys realize that Chase has been dancing just feet from Bonnie’s hanged body. The film engages a visual pun in this scene when Chase bumps into Bonnie’s swinging form just as he expresses desire to “feel” her. This is the only time any of the boys will actually touch the Lisbon sisters. In this way, their protest becomes fully, gruesomely embodied.

In both *Linden Hills* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the potential for subversive action and for bold testimony is undermined by the fact that records of women's suffering are lost or interpreted by men. At the end of *Linden Hills*, the Nedeed Women's writings, and Willa's interpretations of them, die when Willa burns down the house. These first-hand accounts of the Nedeed family are thus superseded in the text by the detached, conservative, and patriarchal voice of Professor Braithwaite, a man who, in striking similarity to the sociologist Herbert Gans,⁵³ moves in to Linden Hills for the express purpose of documenting the lives of those who live there. Braithwaite cuts the branches off the Linden trees in his back yard to allow him an unobstructed view of the hills and houses above him. Braithwaite's house is situated in such a way that he is able to view the spectacular suicide of Laurel Dumont as she climbs the ladder of her high dive and plunges into the empty pool fifty feet below.⁵⁴ Braithwaite's commitment to objective observation, however, keeps him from intervening in her death. When he comments to Lester and Willie that he knew Laurel "wasn't insane" but that she "died as deliberately as she lived," and that he "could tell she was on that path months ago," Lester and Willie are shocked and disturbed to know that Braithwaite had observed her struggle and not done anything to help. Despite the fact that Braithwaite watches Laurel day after day,

⁵³ In 1967 Herbert Gans published *The Levittowners*, a study of life in a suburb in Willingboro, New Jersey. Gans wrote the book after living in the suburb for several years and observing the residents as they attempted to get their new community up and running. However, contrary to Braithwaite, who believes that the residents of Linden Hills were slowly having pieces of themselves "*taken away*," Gans ultimately concluded that the Levittown of his study was not the stultifying place it was made out to be but was generally beneficial to its residents (260).

⁵⁴ Laurel commits suicide shortly after she separates from her husband and Luther informs her that she will have to move out of her house. Since the house is in her husband's name, and since the houses are not technically owned, but leased, Laurel has no legal rights to the house. But even before Luther informs her of her new, vulnerable position, she as already begun to come unhinged from reality and has realized that her house will not be enough upon which to base a life.

and knows enough of her to interpret her emotions and predict her actions, he considers himself “a mere outsider” who had neither the right nor the obligation to step in. This clear indictment of the idea of objective history suggests that stories partially told do more damage than those not told at all.

Willa, Laurel, and the Lisbon sisters all subvert male notions of female propriety when they ensure there will be witnesses to the destruction of their bodies and their homes. And yet, allowing men to maintain control of the way their stories are told is certainly problematic. Just as Braithwaite watches, interprets, and archives the lives of the residents of his suburb, the narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* observes the Lisbon sisters in a vain attempt to understand them. In addition to their surveillance of the Lisbon house, the boys collect artifacts and create a collection. They create the story of the Lisbon sisters (with some acknowledgement that they are missing pieces of the story, that they don't know detail, and that they have likely invented some) through their interpretation of things they have collected and through interviews of “witnesses.” Yet, no amount of “things” brings them any closer to understanding who Cecilia, Mary, Lux, Bonnie, and Therese are, nor why they killed themselves. Shortly before the girls leave their lives forever, the boys gather in a garage to sort through their collection:

A year had passed [since Cecilia's death] and still we knew nothing. From five the girls had reduced themselves to four, and they were all—the living and the dead—becoming shadows. Even their assorted possessions arrayed at our feet didn't reassert their existence, and nothing seemed more anonymous than a certain vinyl go-go purse, covered with

gold chain, that could have belonged to any of the girls, or to any girl in the world. (187)

The boys hope to discern some truth about the essence of the girls by examining their things, but they miss the important point that they are not “girls” but four separate people. Their possessions make them more anonymous and homogenous rather than less. It is in order to destroy the boys sense that they know the girls, or that they have any ownership of their stories, that the girls call the boys to their house on their final night. On seeing Bonnie’s hanged body in the basement, the narrator understands that he “had never known her. They had brought us here to find that out” (215). Their final message is one of silence, and protection of their story. Such a message would have fallen flat had it not been delivered within the Lisbon home, the site of the original tragedy and the space into which the boys place so much of the blame for the girls’ suffering.

The last images of the Lisbon house in the film are indicative of the emotional power that the house itself holds over the boys. After the girls kill themselves, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon move away, leaving the house to be packed up and sold by a real estate agent. As the narrator is recounting these days, the film lingers on slow shots of the interior of the house, empty of people but still populated with furniture covered in shroud-like dust covers and pieces of plastic. These images are tinged with an eerie, dim, blue light and suggest that the house mourns its loss but is also filled with ghosts. In the final shots, the boys stand on the lawn across the street from the Lisbons’ empty house as the narrator contemplates the girls and their deaths. Once again, the boys imagine themselves as heroes whose rescue of the girls was thwarted by a force they do not

understand. They are ultimately unable to see the girls any more clearly than the women who gossip about them or the reporters who sensationalize their stories. They know only that “It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn’t heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.” As they stare at the house, one of the boys flicks on a lighter and holds it high above him in silent tribute to the girls. Although the girls are trapped in their rooms “for all time,” the boys are equally bound by the power of the house. The novel indicates that they will return to the scene of the Lisbons’ deaths like dogs on the scent of lost prey, “smear[ing] their muzzles in [the girls’] last traces, of mud marks on the floor” and that they are doomed “to breathe forever the air of the rooms in which they killed themselves” (248). The film mimics this internal trapping by suggesting that the boys will be similarly ensnared in suburban space. As the final shot pans away from the boys and their upheld lighter, it tilts toward the ivy-covered houses of the street and then beyond, not to the road and the suggestion of mobility, but to the dense foliage of the trees, symbols of suburban conformity and disease. This final image of mourning and claustrophobia hints at a combined longing for a safe and secure home that protects those within it, and the need to escape the confines of home as defined in suburbia. Such paradoxical longings are more fully explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

HOMEWARD BOUND: LONGING AND MOBILITY IN *HOUSEKEEPING*

AND ANYWHERE BUT *HERE*

Home is demarcated territory with both physical and symbolic boundaries that ensure that dwellers can control access and behavior within. Although this center is clearly distinguished from its surroundings, it is also strongly oriented within it. The orientation is to the compass points, the celestial bodies, the surrounding geography, and the access routes. To be at home is to know where you are; it means to inhabit a secure center and to be oriented in space.

— Kimberly Dovey, “Home and Homelessness”

In the passage above, Kimberly Dovey reflects on home as a space and a philosophy that provides to those that dwell within it the comfort of knowing that there are secure boundaries between the domestic space and the threatening world beyond. Dovey claims that “To be at home is to know where you are” and that such knowing demands a solid point of reference, “oriented in space,” to which one may return. Her insistence on this matter underscores a central belief that home is, at its most fundamental, a fixed space. In this chapter, I grapple with the notion of home as unmovable by examining texts that represent figures who leave the home-space proper and attempt to reconcile their need for mobility with a simultaneous desire for home. While my discussion of *Linden Hills* and *The Virgin Suicides* considered figures who long to escape their homes, their desires stem from the fact that they are being held prisoner by their families and by the restrictive social codes of their suburban surroundings. Though their rebellions against domestic entrapment are radical, they fail

to imagine positive ways to refigure domesticity. Moreover, even though their embodied protests call attention to the regulatory mechanisms at work in suburbia, movement beyond or away from their constraints seems impossible for the young women in these texts; their dissent takes place within the home and usually leads to death. In this chapter, I argue that Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) and Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here* (1986) are texts that consider home-life and domesticity in ways that vary from the middle class texts already discussed. Both of these texts centralize the tension between longing for home and longing for freedom. Specifically, they utilize the figure of the wandering woman in order to critique both the limits placed on women who are expected to maintain and stay within the domestic sphere as well as romanticized portrayals of women who leave the domestic space and become transients. These texts suggest that limiting women's possibilities either to home or to wandering makes happiness in either situation nearly impossible. These novels offer alternatives to such binary thinking in portraying women who approach both home and away with a more fluid sense of possibilities. The moments in which domesticity and transience intersect and inform one another offer insight into why home is such a powerful and complex conceptual framework.

Both novels struggle with the paradox and pain of the simultaneous draw of home and transience. Sylvie and Ruth in *Housekeeping* bring a wandering philosophy into their domestic life, and Adele and Ann in *Anywhere but Here* must contend with the demands of home-life lived on the road. All of these women engage the dangerous spaces of the road and unfamiliar domestic spaces in ways that figure them as subjects

painfully out of place. But rather than seeing their displacement as strictly limiting, I argue that the very act of attempting to blend home and away allows them to disrupt the conventional ways that women were so strongly define in the middle of the century. Rosi Braidotti's theory of the nomad, as presented in her study *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* is useful here. Braidotti argues that the nomad, as a figure "that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior," provides a philosophical framework through which to establish a new "vision of female feminist subjectivity" (5, 1). Braidotti draws specifically on the notion of the nomad as different from either the exile or the migrant since, to her mind, the nomad is neither forcibly ejected from her home country, and thus haunted by the memory of her loss, as is the exile, nor is she prevented from establishing a new and productive life by the ever-present knowledge of outsider status, as is the migrant. In the exile and the migrant Braidotti finds the suffering of people "compulsively displaced," subsumed by their new country's dominant culture, and relegated to third-class status (22). The nomad suggests a different relation to space, class, and culture in that it is the nomad's goal to remain in motion, to establish connections briefly, and to discover strength in an unfixed position that allows for interaction of multiple selves and subject positions.

As Braidotti notes, the nomad reclaims that which is often considered a disadvantage—impermanence, lack of place of origin, constant movement—and suggests ways in which such difficulties might make a subject more flexible:

The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity. The nomadic subject, however, is not altogether devoid of unity; his/her mode is one of definite, seasonal patterns of movement through rather fixed routes. It is a cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, rhythmic displacement. (22)

Nomadic subjects, then, are elastic, supple, and prepared for, even dependent upon, the kind of movement—both physical and mental/intellectual—that cannot be found in traditional domestic scenarios. The figures in *Housekeeping*, and *Anywhere but Here*, Sylvie and Adele in particular, would seem to fit Braidotti's outline of the radical, feminist, nomadic subject well. And yet, her proposal that nomadic subjects gain their power and their flexibility from the fact that they have no point of origin, and, thus, nothing to mourn the loss of, diminishes the sense of displacement that many of the characters, in these texts, Ruth and Ann especially, feel when they move away from home and onto the road. Moreover, the fact that Ruth and Ann (and, to a lesser extent, Adele) express grief over a real home-place or domestic ideal while they are still *at home* suggests that moving away from identities based on a sense of belonging to place, family, and home space, is almost impossible to achieve. Therefore, while Braidotti's theories of nomadism are helpful to this dissertation, and useful to consider as potential

feminist goals, I consider the female figures in these texts as not purely nomadic subjects, but as subjects torn by their conflicting desires for both home and mobility. While there is room to consider their positions as merely underdeveloped versions of the nomadic subject, it is important to examine the in-between state for what it can tell us about the desire for home in recent years. Therefore, I argue that neither the road nor home are pure spaces of opportunity or of oppression in these texts but are, instead, spaces to be contested, spaces that must be stripped of their mythology if new potentials for expression are to be found.

The driving force of these texts is, more often than not, an attempt to literally move away from the home-space. Such motivation necessarily calls to mind the long history of the wanderer, hobo, or “tramp” figure in American history. Considered at various moments and by various groups to be a symbol of adventure and the pioneering spirit, as well as a figure of contempt and ridicule, the tramp is uniquely American and undeniably tied to sentiment about home. The wandering individual, the tramp, the transient, and the vagabond⁵⁵ are all well-known figures in American literature and culture and their history is a complicated one.⁵⁶ Their ability to strike out on their own has always spoken to our greatest desires, as a country and as individuals, to make our own rules, path, and destiny. This figure maintains his mystique and romance specifically because he does not do as the rest of us do; that is, the tramp does not go to work, does not get married, does not have children, and does not return home at the end

⁵⁵ These terms are not strictly interchangeable. For a discussion of the historical differences, see Tim Creswell’s *The Tramp in America* and Stephanie Golden’s *The Women Outside*. For my purposes in this dissertation, I will be using the terms “transient” and “tramp” interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁶ For a good history of the homeless, “tramp” figure in the United States, see Creswell.

of the day. This disdain for the everyday life espoused by the American Dream causes both admiration and denigration of the tramp. While we may envy the tramp, we also loathe him. His seeming indifference to the everyday desires and concerns of the mainstream strike us as unusual and odd, and his strangeness highlights the more conventional lives of those who criticize his.

Of particular importance to this dissertation is the way that the tramp has typically been seen as a powerful figure. The tramp not only transcends the physical boundaries of home (insulated, isolated, secure) and road (open, vulnerable, wild) but also the ideological boundaries of correct behavior. Occupying a particularly prominent place in the national imagination during the “tramp scare” of the late 1800s, and then again during the Great Depression, unemployed transients have long represented a threat to the security of the traditional home.⁵⁷ For some, this threat was a physical one that took the shape of the tramp on the back doorstep. The bodily figure of the tramp was a source of fear to many women who spent their days at home alone with their children and worried that their homes and bodies might be overtaken by a man in search of a handout or something worse.⁵⁸ Some would argue, though, that the tramp’s greater power was his ability to dissolve the theoretical boundaries of the home. As Tim Cresswell notes, “Discourses on respectability at the time [1880s and 90s] painted a happy picture of secure family life as the source of a moral culture that was the bedrock for social stability. By their homelessness, tramps threatened one of the central images in

⁵⁷ Cresswell argues that tramps were “‘made up’ in America around 1870,” rather than being discovered, and that they were conceived as “super-mobile masculine figure[s]” (13).

⁵⁸ See Cresswell’s chapter “Gendering the Tramp,” for a discussion of the threat by tramps to both the “sexualized body and the maternal body” of women.

American ideology and national mythology” (94). If society allowed some of its citizens to come and go as they pleased, to move, eat, and sleep wherever they felt like doing so, and to shirk the assumed duties of healthy and able men to work and earn money, how strong, really, was the power of the conventional family structure? What kind of hold would home and children have over a man who saw his fellows taking to the road for adventure and freedom?

The tramp scare came about specifically at a time when the country was moving toward a more independent model of family and domesticity. Homes in this time were less likely to house extended family, and often consisted of only husband, wife, and children. Additionally, the country was becoming increasingly industrialized and urban, which meant more and more families lived in cities or in places far removed from the support systems of parents, aunts, uncles, and community that previous generations might have taken for granted. Such changes made it vital to the survival of isolated families that husbands, typically the only wage-earner, could be counted on to come home every night and contribute, at least monetarily, to the welfare of the home.

Cresswell makes the argument that the tramp is not a figure that simply existed during the late nineteenth century but was created during this period to serve as a warning to men who might take up a wandering lifestyle instead of staying home with their wives and children. Further impetus for the creation of the tramp lies in the desire to establish a strictly bound norm for “civilized” society that would be attached to place in a way that the United States had not really been before. As Cresswell notes,

A new model of description [for wandering individuals] came into being and new possibilities for action arose as a consequence. These working definitions of the tramp combined the geographical fact of mobility and ideas about work to differentiate between mobility that was to be applauded and mobility that was suspect. (49)

As is common for marginalized groups, the tramp was categorized and stigmatized in order to maintain the limits of the category from which they were being excluded. In the case of the tramp, men, and to a lesser extent women, who wandered with no visible signs of gainful employment were labeled as deviant so that such behavior would no longer be seen as appealing to the majority. As Sally A. Shumaker and Gerald J. Conti note,

Once the country was settled, the positive feelings associated with relocation were replaced with concerns that mobility might be linked to social instability and fragmentation. Thus, the free spirit side of the wanderer image became overshadowed by the negative assumption that, as wanderers, Americans were unwilling to invest in community. (238)

Where movement and adventure had once been the catalyst for progress and westward expansion in the U.S., the cultural atmosphere of the post-Civil War United States was one that called more for security, family building, and home-boundedness. This could not be achieved if men continued to see wandering as a valid option. This need for the stability of the home, coupled with the rise of immigrant populations who had less

access to stable employment in major U.S. cities and were more likely to move about in search of work, allowed for the birth of the tramp as a figure of ridicule and contempt.

Creating the tramp depended on establishing the act of wandering as strange and suspicious behavior and marking those who wandered as different and lower than those who did not. The act of wandering and the wanderer himself could be considered as separate issues—one the regrettable act and one the potentially reformable individual—or as components of the same concept. This becomes clear when you consider that “tramp” can act as both noun (the tramp wanders) and verb (the man tramps about). This double meaning allowed the tramp to be simultaneously vilified and pitied. You would necessarily see the case of transience differently if you considered the behavior separate from or inextricably bound to the subject. The most troubling rhetoric surrounding transient figures—that they are psychologically disturbed, sexually deviant, morally unsound, and physically diseased—worked to set them apart from “normal” society and to establish them as figures to be both pitied and feared. Many viewed the tramp as deserving of help and attention, but others saw figures worthy only of scorn. Despite these differences, virtually everyone viewed the tramp as something to be eradicated. Stephanie Golden points to the conception of poverty as an “evil” in the mid to late nineteenth century as the prevailing force working against the homeless: “as a fault not of the social system but of the individual, poverty was thought to be closely connected to criminality, insanity, and other types of defects, so that all deviant members of society were lumped conceptually into a single undifferentiated group” (114-115). Once poverty and transience were established as states of “idleness” and immorality, the homeless,

being the most visibly poor, became the most vulnerable to the whims of social reformers and law-enforcement agents. Golden goes on to note that, “Reformers sought to make assistance contingent on entering an almshouse or poor house, where the able-bodied could be made to work,” and that transients often got no help other than temporary lodging rooms provided by the police (115). Whether the tramp was eliminated through the work of charity organizations that helped the homeless men and women to establish themselves in a more secure life, or by the work of eugenics scientists who advocated for their forced sterilization and removal to workhouses, prisons, and even, in the most drastic of suggestions, islands dedicated to the housing of all social deviants, the common thread was a belief that everyone would be better off if no one lived a transient life. Both groups of reformers, whether helping or condemning the transient, were actually working to widen the gap between what was acceptable and what was not. Class boundaries were solidified around issues of transience through both vilification and pity. In either case, the transient’s situation was not enviable.

What marks transients as different from the rest of society, and thus eligible for our charity and scorn, is strongly linked to ideas of movement and space. We place the homeless figure at such a conceptual distance from the rest of society for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that he is a figure out of bounds, and without a home. The transient, in his actual movement, is not guaranteed to be in the same place from day to day, and, therefore, embodies our fears and confusion about how life can be lived outside the security of the traditional home-space. Such an unconventional relationship to normal spatial habits is further exemplified in the transient’s inability to engage in

typical domestic activities. Existing beyond the normal boundaries of domestic space—on street corners, under train tracks, in tramp “jungles,” in parks—the tramp throws our lived reality into sharp relief. In doing so, the homeless individual causes us to consider our own homes and their potential failings. We are bothered further by these figures because of the bodily ways in which they call attention to their boundary breaking. They do not, and are not able to, maintain the same domestic rituals involved in the upkeep of the body. They have little access to bathroom facilities, kitchens, or comfortable sleeping quarters and, as such, are less able to keep clean, prepare food, or sleep in ways that we expect all people to do. These fundamental failings are often outwardly visible and all but shout to observers of their significance. The transient thus breaks spatial rules both by moving about and by allowing the boundaries to fade between himself and the elements that more “civilized” people try to keep at bay.

While the male tramp is a powerful and frightening figure in the U.S. consciousness, female tramps are something different. As Cresswell notes, “While the gendering of the tramp was based (in part) on familiar sets of categorizations and assumptions about private and public space, home and away, the women tramps were developing identities that challenged the core values of American society in ways that even the male tramp could not” (104). Female tramps shared many of the same labels in terms of their deviance and deficiencies, but were enigmatic in their womanhood. Cresswell points to female tramps being labeled as “lesbian” or “prostitute” as attempts to “fit the tramp’s bodies back into texts and codes that were in some sense known” (105). One of the most famous examples of female hoboes is the oft-discussed “Boxcar

Bertha.” Bertha Thompson was a railroad tramp in the 1930s who made her way around the country by relying on the favors of the male tramps with whom she traveled. Ben Reitman details Bertha’s roaming and general behavior in the biography *Sister of the Road*. The book talks about Bertha but also attempts to examine her as an example of a particular class of tramps—female hoboes—and, most interestingly, to reincorporate her into the domestic ideal. Although Bertha has spent years on the road and engaged in behavior that would clearly label her as a deviant, the end of the book focuses on the fact that she eventually decides that the most important thing for her to do is to return to her “home” and her child.⁵⁹ It is significant that Bertha is brought back into the domestic fold while male tramps are not.⁶⁰ As Golden notes,

whereas a homeless man can be assigned comfortably to a variety of categories (hobo, tramp, bum, vagrant) and be relatively easily dismissed, a homeless woman creates discomfort because she cannot be categorized. Women are so entirely defined in terms of whom they belong to that no category exists for a woman without family or home (5).

When Bertha is brought back into traditional domesticity at the end of her biography, she is reassigned both home and family, thus removing her dangerous potential and reducing her to mere curiosity. The female tramp is such a threatening figure then not because of her potential to do bodily harm or to undermine the financial stability of a family or home, the way a male tramp might, but because the very idea of a woman who would choose the road over home and family questions the framework of the domestic model.

⁵⁹ Cresswell

⁶⁰ See Marilyn C. Wesley’s *Secret Journeys* 83.

If some women would choose to live out of doors, to make their own lives, to be free of a certain set of constraints, why wouldn't other women? The very existence of female tramps was, and continues to be, threatening in a way male tramps could never be.

The figure of the tramp embodies many of the anxieties about home, movement, security, family, and psychological and physical well-being that are central to this study. I argue that all of the texts with which I work, whether or not their protagonists physically leave their domestic spaces, grapple with the idea of the tramp in both literal and figurative ways. In some cases, the figures in these works are actual tramps, leaving their homes and calling attention to the limited ways that domestic practices and domestic spaces are understood in contemporary America. Those that do not leave their homes may attempt to do so, or may respond to the threat of a wandering life by violently enforcing a restrictive, home-bound lifestyle on themselves and those around them. In both cases, movement and its consequent questioning of the proper role and manifestation of homes and domesticity is centralized.

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

A house should have a compass and a keel.
— Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, considers the possibility of the coexistence of mobility and home. The female protagonists in the novel, Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille, are all either transient or must decide whether or not to become transient. Although I discussed the rejection of traditional home spaces in the previous chapter of this

dissertation, *Housekeeping* considers this rejection in a new way. One of the most important differences is that the characters in this novel experience home and houses in less certain terms than do the figures in the previous chapter. In *Linden Hills* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the decisions to resist conventional domesticity and the gender expectations that inform such domesticity typically stem from a need to escape situations (either actual or perceived) that are dangerous to body or mind. In *Housekeeping*, Robinson portrays figures whose choices are less clear. Furthermore, the characters in this text do not have the choices that the more financially secure ones of the previous chapter do. This book is useful as a transitional text for this dissertation: it is informed by the middle-class ideology of home that inundates the texts in Chapter II as it moves toward a more complex consideration of mobility, materiality, and class. These are all concerns that will be further expanded in Chapter IV in which I discuss Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt Maine*, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone*.

In the first words of *Housekeeping* we meet the protagonist/narrator Ruth and learn that she was raised, with her sister Lucille, by a succession of female relatives and subsequently abandoned by all but the final guardian, her Aunt Sylvie. When Sylvie takes over their care, and introduces them to her unusual domestic style, the girls must learn how to live differently or establish lives of their own. Utterly displeased with Sylvie's odd housekeeping, and approach to life generally, Lucille eventually leaves home in order to begin a more conventional life. Conversely, Ruth is unbothered by Sylvie's habits, or at least unable to define her feelings on the subject, and stays with

Sylvie until they are forced, under threat of a court-ordered separation, to flee their home and town. The beginning of the novel offers a truncated overview of the events that bring Ruth to the place she will be at the end of the novel—an itinerant worker who moves around the country with Sylvie. What is conspicuously left out of this brief autobiography is the figure of Ruth’s mother, Helen, and her abandonment of the children and subsequent suicide. The utter exclusion of Helen in the initial listing of caretakers speaks, paradoxically, to the significant amount of space that she will occupy in the rest of the book. It is only after relaying the story of her ancestors and the town of Fingerbone that Ruth reveals that Helen deposited Ruth and Lucille on their grandmother’s porch and left them so she could drive a borrowed car “from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake” (22). Just as Ruth spends the novel trying to come to terms with her mother’s suicide, she must likewise struggle with the abandonment, freedom, and motion that this event brings into her life.

Helen’s suicide is the physical enactment of the simultaneous pull of stability and mobility at work in the novel. In her assessment of this scene, Deborah Clarke suggests that “Choosing death in a car to life in a house indicates how fragile the home has become” (141). I would argue, however, that the scene of Helen’s death is more interesting when considered as a juxtaposition of the primary states of being in the text: stasis and motion. Helen drives the girls from Spokane, Washington to her old home in Fingerbone, Idaho, then, after depositing the girls on her mother’s porch, tells them to “wait quietly,” and goes off on her own to “sail” her car into the lake. The fact that Helen is driving at all, and that she goes on a long-distance car trip with her daughters in

tow and no man to help her, suggests that Helen is an atypical, even radical, woman since such acts were unusual for women in the middle of the twentieth century.⁶¹ Her mobility—she drives and she leaves her daughters—is set in stark contrast to her daughters’ stillness—they sit in the back seat and then on the porch. The focus on this scene so early in the novel foregrounds the ideas of movement and motion and their connection to freedom and choice. But freedom is also questioned since even Helen’s most audacious act of motion, the supremely autonomous choice to fling herself off a cliff, would have been unsuccessful without the help of other people. Helen’s abandonment of her daughters requires their participation, thus, her mobility is only possible at the expense of their stasis. Even her actual suicide is an exercise in motion and stasis: on her way to drive herself off a cliff and into the town lake, Helen’s car gets stuck in the mud and she has no choice but to sit and wait until two boys from the town come by and help her get unstuck.

The significance of movement and freedom in the novel is most clearly demonstrated through the figure of the transient, or tramp. The setting of the novel is somewhat ambiguous (no dates are ever given) but readers and critics often assume, mostly from descriptions of Lucille’s attire, that the majority of the action takes place around, or soon after, the middle of the twentieth century.⁶² By this time, the great “tramp scare” in the U.S. is over and the main means of travel for the vagabond or hobo—the railway—is changing drastically and making movement across the country

⁶¹ See Clarke’s thorough discussion of women and car culture. The first chapter, “Women on Wheels,” offers a particularly helpful history.

⁶² Marilyn Chandler, in her chapter on *Housekeeping* and *Beloved*, argues that the novel is set in the 1950s.

more difficult for transients than it once was. Furthermore, the number of tramps has generally declined, making their once-common gathering places—tramp jungles—increasingly scarce. In this way, Sylvie's stories of rail cars and a wandering existence seem a bit anachronistic. What is most important here is not the reality of the hobo way of life at the time of the novel's setting, but the ways in which Sylvie is compared to the mythical hobo in which the people of Fingerbone still believe. Robinson complicates the typical notion of the transient figure, first because the tramp here is female, and second because she places the figure in a home setting. The figure of the transient is powerful in this novel about home and family, security and abandonment, because the female who chooses a wandering life uniquely encompasses all of these concerns. As a transient figure charged with the care of two children, and whose fitness for this duty is constantly in question, Sylvie represents ideologies of home and family while her wandering is coded as a refusal of them.

Sylvie's tendency to wander makes her alien in the eyes of the town. She literally and figuratively strays from the normal path, and her unusual roaming is noticed. When she talks to strangers in the bus station, sleeps on park benches, or buys Ruth and Lucille fanciful gifts at the general store, she makes her strangeness public and, thus, invites the scrutiny of the town and the eventual invasion of her home by it. But, to be clear, it is not the actual act of movement that necessarily marks Sylvie as different from the rest of the town, since other people also move about on their way to and from various errands. Rather, it is the seeming lack of purpose in Sylvie's movements that strikes the town as odd. Sylvie, used to the life of a transient, seems loath to structure her days, preferring to

make decisions about what to eat and when, where to go and how long to stay, based on the whims of the moment. Sylvie is a radical figure, therefore, not simply because she naps on public benches or makes the girls eat dinner in the dark but because she seems unable, or unwilling, to differentiate between things that are meant to be done indoors and those that are not, or actions that are “proper” and those that are frowned upon. Her habits highlight her difference and, therefore, her potential threat to the girls, their home, and the town.

When Sylvie combines ideologies of wandering with those of home, she embraces opposites and enacts a fluid interchange between the acceptable and the taboo. This creates the possibility, in the novel and in a larger feminist project, of a new kind of domesticity—one that makes room for inconsistencies and freedom of choice.⁶³ Within the world of the text, however, such actions undermine Sylvie’s ability to make her own choices and to live an autonomous life. Her capacity to be Ruth and Lucille’s guardian is open to public scrutiny because of her transient past and unconventional present. While there are certainly other less than perfect guardians in *Fingerbone*, Sylvie is not afforded the same benefit of the doubt or lenience in her caretaking style that other, less public, people would be. The women of the town seem particularly judgmental in part because Sylvie’s disregard for housework and the conventions of domesticity undermines the worth of such work, of *their* work. While men have often belittled the work that women do—Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* is a potent example—it is quite another thing for a woman

⁶³ As many critics have suggested, Sylvie’s transience represents Robinson’s concerns in the novel with breaking down boundaries between inside and out, home and away, domesticity and wandering. Particularly astute discussions of this can be found in Jacqui Smyth’s “Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*” and Christine Caver’s “Nothing Left to Lose: *Housekeeping*’s Strange Freedoms.”

to do so. When Sylvie arrives back in Fingerbone, she carries with her the stain of her tramping past. Initially, the town seems genuinely pleased to see Sylvie return and is legitimately concerned that she learn the proper ways to care for Ruth and Lucille. What they need in order to accept Sylvie into their community is for Sylvie to relinquish her transient ways and conform to the conventions of motherhood and homemaking that they understand and with which they are comfortable. Any trace of latent transience is unacceptable.⁶⁴ Therefore, Sylvie's continued tendency to wander during the day, to roam the woods and cross the lake on a stolen boat, upset the people of the town because such actions indicate that she has not been transformed but instead resembles the transients living under the bridge or waiting in the station for a train. Sylvie does not, and perhaps cannot, become the kind of homemaker the town wishes her to be. For example, when Sylvie moves into her mother's old room she never unpacks her things, preferring to keep them in a box under the bed. She sleeps fully clothed, keeps money pinned inside her dress, and prefers to eat food that is cold and easy to prepare.⁶⁵ Sylvie is not a former transient come home to care for her sister's orphaned children. She is, instead, a transient woman who lives indoors.

⁶⁴ Linguistically, the idea of a "trace" is interesting here. As a noun, it indicates a small amount of something, sometimes used as evidence. It can also mean a trail—something between a road and a route. As a verb, it means to track, or watch. For Sylvie, and all of the women discussed in this chapter, desires to live an alternative kind of life signal to those around them trace amounts of "wrongness." Their wrongness subsequently becomes the catalyst for surveillance and institutional limits on their movements and actions.

⁶⁵ Sylvie's odd housekeeping and uneasiness within the house have been widely discussed in the criticism of this novel. Marcia Aldrich offers a particularly strong reading of Sylvie's strange housekeeping that argues for Sylvie's desire for balance. She argues that "Sylvie's house appreciates in spiritual, imaginative and poetical value as its value as a structure of symbolic and human order declines. Unlike the usual housekeeper who keeps raw matter and brute nature outside, guarding the womb from the assaults of weather, decay, darkness, and animal trespass, Sylvie invites such intrusions, thereby privileging natural flux until an equilibrium is reached" (131).

The very idea of a homeless woman who comes indoors calls to mind the abject. Since wandering is considered antithetical to female nature, women who move about, who remove themselves from the home, are difficult to categorize. In their radical departure from feminine norms and engagement with an environment beyond the confines and protection of the home space they become less than human. By bringing indoors that which has been relegated to the trash pile, or the street, the homeless woman within a home upsets our classifications of inside and out, and dirt and cleanliness. As Julia Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Homeless women, because they are female and thus tied to conceptions of motherhood and domestic space, and because they are displaced, and without a home, are in-between, and composites. Sylvie is such a composite. When Sylvie suddenly reappears, it is immediately clear that she has long been absent—from the girls’ lives and from the “civilized” world as a whole. On the evening that Sylvie returns, she walks from the train station to the house and arrives somewhat battered by the elements: “Her hair was wet, her hands were red and withered from the cold, her feet were bare except for loafers. Her raincoat was so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it on a bench” (45). She has made a measured effort to present her best self to her aunts and nieces but her “deep green” dress with “satiny shine” and “short sleeves” simply underscores her long absence from “cultured” society.⁶⁶ In addition to signaling a life

⁶⁶ Much of the disturbing power of women outside of the home is found in their ability to upset borders in

lived out of doors, Sylvie's oddity, and the way she comes into the house wet and shriveled from the weather also ties her to her father's and sister's deaths by drowning.⁶⁷ In fact, Ruth soon realizes that Sylvie "reminded [her] of [her] mother more and more. There was such a similarity, in fact, in the structure of cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of [her] mother, and then to displace it" (53). Sylvie signals the abject both by being a homeless woman indoors and in the ways that her raw and dripping body connects her to death.

Despite the fact that Ruth and Lucille's aunts interpret Sylvie's green dress and generally composed demeanor as evidence that "She seems rather sane! She seems rather normal!" it is soon clear to the reader that Sylvie is uneasy within her new domestic setting. On her first morning, she sits in the darkened kitchen with her overcoat on, eating food directly out of the bag, and speaks to the girls about travel and trains. Her transient habits soon influence the way she manages her domestic space and the house soon becomes a repository of debris, both natural and man made, that housekeeping is meant to keep out. As Cresswell notes, transients have always been associated with the detritus of society. Homelessness and wandering blur the boundaries between ourselves and our waste: our trash, our bodily dirt, the ground. In engaging those parts of themselves and their surroundings that house-bound individuals would ward against, they draw attention to their physical excess and mark themselves as other. Their

bodily ways. In this scene, Sylvie is described in terms of the ways that her physical appearance highlights her strangeness and in the ways that the weather has had an effect on her body. I look further at this connection between wandering women and their visible, boundary breaking bodies in my discussion of *Anywhere but Here*.

⁶⁷ Her wet hair and cold, shriveled hands tie her to her father and sister's deaths by drowning in the icy lake. There is much in the novel to suggest that Sylvie is, if only symbolically, Ruth and Lucille's mother returned from the depths of the lake.

behavior confounds recognized “positions” and “rules.” Forced to carry their belongings with them at all times, the difference between their bodies, their homes, and their things disappears. They do not “belong” anywhere in particular because their “belongings” are portable. Likewise, the things that they carry stand in for both self and home. The term “bag lady” is instructive here in the way that it metonymically links the object that defines the woman and the woman herself. There is no difference between the trash and the individual, as each functions to create the other.

Transient women in particular arouse suspicion and disgust on the part of observers; they are viewed as diseased, dirty, “things.” Such women, considered more deviant because of their gender, are strongly associated with the things they carry with them: things that are usually supposed to be worthless collections of trash. These women not only interact with the abject—by sleeping on the street or eating food that others have discarded—they actually *become* the abject. They are unkempt and unwashed, and, as Sylvie does, they dress in layers and hide bits of paper, money, and trinkets about their person. The women themselves, even without the “bags” that define them to the outside eye, mimic their belongings in their tendency toward haphazard organization, nonsensical collection, and markedly unusual dress. Critic Paula Geyh notes Sylvie’s compulsion to collect junk suggesting that “Sylvie mistakes accumulation for housekeeping—she understands the connection of housekeeping to the accrual of property, but not to the processes of sorting and excluding” (107).⁶⁸ Sylvie’s refusal to

⁶⁸ Christine Wilson also notes Sylvie’s accumulations of things, suggesting that “Sylvie’s misunderstanding of housekeeping further manifests itself in her misconception of literal *keeping* as a method of housekeeping” (304). Likewise, Laura Barrett notes that “Housekeeping, in Sylvie’s eccentric hands, becomes something other than the maintenance of a household. It encourages the interplay of inside

“sort” and “exclude” those things that are meant to be discarded suggests that she embraces a form of homemaking that sees the useful potentials of trash. But her collections seem arbitrary and easily disposable (Ruth and Lucille occasionally discard Sylvie’s stashes) and easily misunderstood by the women of the town. Geyh further suggests that the location of Sylvie’s collections, “the parlor [...] filled with newspapers and cans stacked to the ceiling,” allows for a confusion of domestic spaces with liminal spaces that are typically allotted for the storage of junk, “allying the parlor with the private, marginal spaces of the house generally used for storage: the basement and the attic” (107).⁶⁹ This connection to trash and the act of bringing it, voluntarily, into the home exposes Sylvie to bodily degradation, the visible markers of abjection. Once made visible to the town, this combination of bodily contamination and trash work together to remove Sylvie’s subjecthood.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that abjection is a tool with which the dominant culture marginalizes those who do not conform. As Judith Butler notes in *Bodies That Matter*, “The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (3). The mainstream citizens of Fingerbone exploit Sylvie and the homeless men as “the abjected outside” necessary for the townspeople to function as fully realized subjects. But those who are pushed to the

and outside, shelter and nature, and dramatizes the tenuousness and deceptiveness of security reminiscent in so-called housekeeping. [...] Keeping a house, for Sylvie, largely means letting it go” (13).

⁶⁹ This kind of space also suggests the ways that Sylvie might be read, or misread, in terms of gender. Sylvie conflates the typically masculine and work-centric spaces of the basement and attic with the lived-in, familial spaces of the parlor. As a transient, Sylvie is often equated with masculinity in her connection to the hoboes that pass through town. It is also possible to read her housekeeping as an inappropriately masculine appropriation of domestic space.

“outside” also acquire their own power in their ability to creatively imagine the broader opportunities available for those at the margins. When the townspeople attempt to reform Sylvie, they do so by urging her to purge her body and her home of those signs of transience that threaten the established boundaries of the home, both in its psychic formations and in its spatial configurations. When she refuses to do so, the townspeople can no longer allow her to stay amongst them. All of this would seem to indicate that Sylvie is stripped of subjectivity by being pushed out of her home, forced to conform or leave. But this is not the case. Rather, Robinson explores the possibility of alternate subject positions that derive their power from the very margins they inhabit. In the eyes of the townspeople, Sylvie, and eventually Ruth, are equated with the dirt and detritus that they refuse to remove from their home. In other words, Sylvie is degraded, cast off, and despised because she does not cast off that which the town believes to be unwholesome. Indeed, she often invites such things into her home and onto her person. While the townspeople maintain their subjectivity by throwing their trash away, or by clearly defining the boundaries between inside and out, Sylvie establishes her understanding of self *because* she is connected in this way with the disposable and the invisible.

In a final effort to appease the townspeople and keep Ruth with her, Sylvie attempts to make the house into something outsiders will find respectable. She and Ruth “polished the windows,” wash and put away all of the dishes, and begin purging the house of all signs of transience. Just as Adele will do in *Anywhere but Here*, Sylvie takes to this task with manic energy, burning magazines and papers by the armload until after

dark. Ruth notes Sylvie's zeal and hopes that "the will to reform might be taken for reform itself" (201). Though Sylvie goes about her cleaning with "enormous diligence and effort," she does so only because she knows that *others* believe such things to be important. Recognizing that their fire makes them visible to all around them, and that everyone in Fingerbone is watching them or, "if not watching, then certainly aware of everything [they] did," Sylvie responds by acting as though this fiery eradication of her things is, in fact, a purification she had long meant to execute. While the cleaning is well intentioned and meant to show the townspeople that Sylvie is serious about keeping house in the proper way, the plan backfires when Ruth refuses to go back into the house and Sylvie turns on all of the lights in order to search for her. The lighted house, glowing in the middle of the night for all to see, signals strangeness and the Sheriff comes to investigate. The house is, thus, on display again, and shows its inhabitants' faults: Ruth is in the orchard late at night without a coat on when she should be in bed, and Sylvie has lost track of her niece and lies to the Sheriff about it. When Sylvie and Ruth attempt to rid their space, and, by extension, themselves of the signs of debasement and abjection that others have put on them, they inadvertently draw the negative attention they were trying to avoid. They become further marked in their attempt to scrub themselves clean.

In her attempt to blur the boundaries between inside and out, Sylvie resides in marginal spaces and finds value in reworking that which is thrown away, and in remapping domestic as well as wild spaces. One of the most prominent ways in which Sylvie reimagines domestic space is by merging it with the natural world. As many critics of *Housekeeping* have commented, images of natural elements, such as water, and

air, permeate the novel. It is often suggested, and rightly so, that such images work to connect many of the characters, Ruth and Sylvie particularly, to the natural world.⁷⁰ Perhaps the most suggestive uses of the tropes of water and air can be seen when they are used to signify that Ruth and Sylvie are connected to the natural and elemental world around them and that such connections isolate them from the rest of the town. Sylvie is the first to be marked by her affinity with air and water and prefers to immerse herself in the elements around her. She invites in cats to keep the bat, bird, and mouse population under control and all of these animals move in and out of open windows. She believes in “stern solvents, and most of all in air,” and frequently comes home from impromptu trips to the lake with her pockets full of fish (85). She seems to the girls, and to the reader, not so much fond of the natural world around her as uninterested in distinguishing nature from her place within it as a human being. She seems not to notice the discomforts of wetness and cold that Ruth and Lucille do and often seems unaware of the girls’ suffering. Sylvie yearns to sink herself, and the house she is in, into the very elements the house was built to exclude. As more of the outside infiltrates the inside, Ruth notes, “Thus finely did our house become attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of weather” (85). As Golden suggests, homeless and transient women are mythically connected to the natural world and often thought to gain other-worldly power from this connection. Outside of the house, Sylvie seems to have access to secrets, treasures, and

⁷⁰ An interesting deviation from the traditional trope of the naturalized female tramp in this novel is the treatment of Sylvie’s father, Edmund Foster. His fanciful animal paintings and yearly trips to collect wildflowers connect him strongly to the natural world and to ideas of mysticism that are expanded upon in Sylvie and Ruth.

powers.⁷¹ Indoors, however, she is likened to a “mermaid in a ship cabin,” and seems strange and vulnerable (99).

Sylvie’s most powerful connection to nature is portrayed through the ways that she breaches established boundaries and dwells within the wild spaces that others would avoid. Robinson explores the bodily manifestations of breached borders by repeatedly thrusting her characters directly into the natural elements from which housekeeping is meant to protect them. One scene early in the novel is especially illuminating. Soon after the Aunts have left and the girls are entrusted to Sylvie’s care, the town lake floods. The Foster home sits at a rise above the town and escapes the worst of the flooding but still suffers an invasion of water.⁷² The common spaces of the house—the kitchen and the parlor—are ankle deep in water, making living in those spaces, if not impossible, certainly uncomfortable. The basement is totally washed out and the floor in between, which holds the room Sylvie lives in (significantly this was also Sylvie’s mother’s room), is flooded to waist height and is completely unlivable. The fact that Sylvie is pushed out of her room and forced to bunk with her nieces represents the first of many attempts by the wider world to push Sylvie out of house.

Sylvie’s response to the flooding of her space is unusual. On the second or third night of the flood, Sylvie and the girls are spending the evening playing cards in their upstairs bedroom. It is only early spring and the power has gone out so it is very cold

⁷¹ Disregarding the cold, Sylvie gains access to a boat that does not belong to her and uses it to take Ruth to a private place in the forests beyond the lake. In this place, Sylvie introduces Ruth to a world of shadow children that move and play just beyond the periphery of her vision. Sylvie believes them to be ghosts and Ruth allows herself temporarily to be taken in by this fantasy.

⁷² As Roberta Rubenstein notes, the singularity of this house lies not only in its odd construction, but in the fact that its creator seemed somehow to know more about what was important and valuable in a house than his crude skills would suggest.

and they have to keep warm by snuggling with bricks that they have heated on the stove. At one point Sylvie goes downstairs to heat some more bricks and does not return. She does not answer when Ruth calls for her and the girls fear that she might be gone. Ruth goes to look for her and, seeing that she is not in the kitchen, instinctively knows that she should check the downstairs bedroom. She “dreaded entering” her grandmother’s room “because it was three steps lower than the kitchen” (72). As she descends into the black pool of water below the stairs, her boots fill with water and she is blinded by the darkness. Ruth must search for Sylvie with “arms outstretched” because it is too dark to see. Ruth finds Sylvie when she brushes up against her and realizes that she is standing in front of the dark window, looking out. Sylvie’s hands are cold and inanimate, and, though “A nerve jumped in the lid of her eye, [...] she did not move” (72). Sylvie has been engulfed by the water and darkness that surround her. The physical borders – the threshold of the doorway, the stairs that lead to the lower levels of the house, the dark window – serve as markers of psychological and social boundaries that get crossed repeatedly in the novel.

Unspeaking and unmoving, Sylvie seems comfortable in this inhospitable place at the same time that she seems undone by it. Just as the borders of their home have been breached, so have Ruth and Sylvie’s bodily and emotional boundaries been taken over. This moment and this room are sites of abjection for Sylvie and, to a lesser degree Ruth, in the way that Kristeva argues “the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (5). This is the room in which Ruth’s grandmother, Sylvie’s mother, lived and died. It is the room that Sylvie has relinquished her transient lifestyle to occupy. The

room is inundated with life and death in literal and figurative ways. The darkness and the black and filthy water they stand in are immeasurably different from the many other examples of water in the text because they have taken over a human space and a space that holds powerful emotional significance.⁷³ When Ruth's boots fill with water, and Sylvie stands at the window looking out, the two women merge with the darkness and the deadly water that suffuse the text. Sylvie's experience here suggests Kristeva's description of the subject who gives in to abjection: "when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject" (5, emphasis original). The borders between human and natural, between present and past, and between reality and imaginary become blurred in this dark room.

This scene is representative of the composite and "in-between"-ness that Sylvie embodies in her role as sister/aunt/mother figure and as home-bound/transient. Sylvie stands in front of a darkened window, looking out. It is almost impossible for Ruth to see her in front of this window, because the house is engulfed in darkness. The darkness of the room is not a chosen darkness, but one imposed by the natural calamity of the flood. And yet darkness is also a completely natural state. Sylvie stands on one side of a clear pane of glass, in a sense merging with its representative boundary between inside and out, domestic and wild, while also being able to see beyond the illusion of its boundary. When Ruth moves across the room and physically disrupts Sylvie's reverie, she makes a

⁷³ Another aspect of this water that ties it to notions of abjectness is the fact that it is actually water from the town lake. This is significant because the town lake is its own reliquary, holding the bodies of many people and significantly those of Ruth's grandfather and mother.

choice to enter into the darkness,⁷⁴ and into the store of memories that are housed in the room. If this scene suggests Sylvie as a composite character, one connected to the abject, it also indicates Robinson's interest in in-between, or liminal, spaces.⁷⁵ While houses are clearly spaces that are set in opposition to both the town and the wilderness that surrounds the house, Sylvie's house consists of multiple, distinct spaces that bear a closer look. Furthermore, the text is full of spaces from which characters attempt to maintain some kind of attachment to the greater world without actually belonging to that world. Such spaces include the park bench, the train car, Ruth's grandmother's room, the attic bedrooms with their strange trapdoor, the orchard, and the boat. As liminal sites, all of these spaces combine sensibilities of civilization and wilderness and indicate complex relationships between the two; rather than requiring either/or ways of thinking, they allow room for both/and. In so doing, they suggest the possibility of alternative domestic practices and even alternative subject positions. By including these indefinite spaces, Robinson reflects a reluctance to represent the usual or the definable in the text, and, in fact, presents few spaces of stability in the novel. Robinson offers a portrait of radical difference in this novel while also pushing toward a consideration of the ways in which binaries might be broken down.

⁷⁴ The darkness is itself another form of border slippage, since in total darkness, where outlines become invisible, everything merges. Ruth recognizes this kind of slippage at work in her relationship with the world and remembers how her grandmother used to encourage Ruth and Lucille to keep their eyes closed when they were afraid of the dark because then they "would not see it" (198). When Ruth shuts her eyes against the darkness, she "noticed the correspondence between the space within the circle of [her] skull and the space around [her]" (198).

⁷⁵ My discussion focuses on these spaces as liminal sites, or sites that combine binaries and suggest a kind of both/and scenario rather than either/or. This is indicated by the fact that liminality refers to thresholds upon which a subject is part of more than one space at once.

Ruth is also connected to liminal spaces, and, eventually, to abjection. However, despite her clear identification with her aunt, Ruth's experiences with liminality and abjection function differently in the novel because Ruth inhabits different spaces than Sylvie. Moreover, Ruth is not as immediately comfortable outside her home. Sylvie frequently crosses the lake and spends her time in the woods, or the wilderness. At the end of the novel, however, when Ruth senses that she and Sylvie will soon have to leave home, she flees not to the woods, but to the orchard. The orchard is a space that cannot be defined comfortably as either domestic or wild, and is actually an amalgam of nature and cultivation. It is also a space that connects Ruth to childhood and to the past, in the form of fairy tale and myth. She imagines herself as a girl in a story:

Once there was a young girl strolling at night in an orchard. She came to a house she had never seen before, all alight so that through any window she could see curious ornaments and marvelous comforts. [...] She would be transformed by the gross light into a mortal child. And when she stood at the bright window, she would find that the world was gone, the orchard was gone, her mother and grandmother and aunts were gone (203-204).

Ruth "haunts" the orchard, hiding behind the trees and in the shadows of the ordered rows, and makes a game of staying at the margins of her "curious" home for a little bit longer. The orchard is a safe space between her past and her future, a place in which to hide that is neither wild nor domestic. But once in the orchard she sees the house as less a space of shelter and comfort than as a fantastical object that no longer belongs to her: "The house stood beyond the orchard with every one of its windows lighted. It looked

large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship—a fantastic thing to find in a garden. I could not imagine going into it” (203). The orchard is the liminal space that most clearly represents Ruth’s feelings about abandoning housekeeping and beginning a wandering life. She knows the house is a threatening space for her—it holds sorrow, memory, and proof of her aunt’s negligent housekeeping that will justify her being placed with the county—but she is not yet ready, or maybe just unwilling, to take up a truly wild life. By moving among spaces that are specifically designated as “beyond” the home, Sylvie and Ruth engage the forbidden aspects of their surroundings. This refiguring of domestic potential, that one can live within and without a conventional home, is unsettling to the townspeople and radical on Sylvie’s part. The merging of body and nature is also a merging of spaces, inside and out, and house and garden. Space, subjectivity, and the bounds of feminine domesticity are all called into question in these moments of merging.

In addition to the ways in which *Housekeeping* reconfigures domestic space to allow room for unconventional housekeeping and a merging of mobility and stasis, the novel further explores domesticity and its potential to surpass customary borders in its representation of things. In contrast to the many texts in recent years that represent characters involved in blind rebellion against consumerism, *Housekeeping* presents characters with a different kind of relationship to things. The notion of commodity goods here is expanded to include the impractical or fanciful, or largely eliminated in favor of the found or collected object. The significance of a relation to objects that moves beyond commercial exchange or use value to allow for the value of found or repurposed objects

(particularly when those objects occupy a home) lies in its tendency and ability to simultaneously empower and endanger. Sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton note in their book *The Meaning of Things* that “It is [...] relatively easy to admit that the things people use, own, and surround themselves with might quite accurately reflect aspects of the owner’s personality” (15). In this study, they focus on domestic objects because “household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as *shapes* the pattern of the owner’s self” (17, emphasis original). Although they find that it is possible, and even quite common, for people to establish identities through the objects they consume, they also note that there is a unique interaction with objects when we change them and “stamp the identity of the owner on its [the object’s] appearance” (62).

Philosopher Walter Benjamin also considered the interaction of collected items within one’s home to be one of the most liberating and creative relations one could have with a thing: “for a collector [...] ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them” (67). He goes on to argue that for a collector there exists “a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order” and that “his existence is tied [...] to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate” (60). Such theoretical concerns can be broadened out to encompass the more casual collector, or in Ruth’s case (as I discuss later) a collector of memory. In *Housekeeping*, the things bought, kept, and collected, and the value imparted to those things, indicate a refiguring of the potential of

material exchange in the domestic realm. Throughout the novel, Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie respond variously to the things of home by collecting, recycling, buying, or hoarding. Their particular habits not only suggest their individual feelings about their place within traditional domesticity but also reveal a set of standards by which all women are judged. Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie each have a different connection to the things that surround them and a different attitude toward the procurement and storage of goods. These different attitudes point toward their varied perspectives on home and transience. Whether things are considered solid and fixed or fleeting and transitory suggests different philosophies of the potential of homes to shelter and protect. Likewise, the willingness to alter the things within a space, and by extension the very nature and use of the space itself, argues that spaces are also meant to be refigured and altered so they can best be used. Domestic ideology and its role in the creation of a female subject—those subjects who are meant to be defined by their roles as homemakers and mothers—are undermined and critiqued in the novel through the trope of the lost, damaged, or destroyed object.

Throughout *Housekeeping*, the typical interaction with material goods—buying what is needed for personal comfort, safety, health, or status—is forgone in favor of Sylvie’s much more free-flowing approach to things. When she buys school clothes for Ruth and Lucille, for example, she chooses based on aesthetics and whimsy rather than practicality. Sylvie’s most visible rejection of traditional relations to the things of home is her tendency to hoard and collect objects that seem to others to be merely piles of trash. Throughout the novel, Robinson challenges our ideas of boundaries, questioning

the differences between inside and outside, home and wilderness, and civilization and depravity. The newspapers, cans, and bottles that inundate the parlor and kitchen of the house, in addition to reflecting Sylvie's connection to transience, work as a kind of recycling of space. As her stacks of old newspapers and aluminum cans grow, they alter the use-value of the parlor. Traditionally conceived of as the most formal room of the house, a room set aside for entertaining and receiving guests, the parlor is now all but uninhabitable. It is difficult for the women of the town to understand Sylvie's strange habits, and the mounds of "garbage" in the "best" room of the house simply reify what they already suspected about her unfitness to care for Ruth and Lucille. When Sylvie moves back into her childhood home, she is forced to reestablish a way of life that she has abandoned and that feels uncomfortable to her. As Joanne Hall argues, "the disarray of the house demonstrate[s] that Sylvie is trying to recreate a hobo jungle. By attempting to mimic her most recent experience of domesticity, she is, despite the town's interpretation of her behavior, attempting to create stability" (46). For Sylvie, these piles of throwaway things are representative of a kind of thrift and protection that she established in her transient life. As Geyh argues, "Sylvie's greatest sin is a failure to respect and maintain the intertwined limits of property and propriety. [...] She fails to observe the distinctions between public and private, [and she] demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the prerogatives of ownership" (116). Paradoxically, it is the very notion of being inside a house that makes her feel unsafe, and unsheltered.

When Sylvie collects/hoards/recycles the things and spaces of the house, she also establishes new boundaries. The boundaries she establishes with these things keep some

people out while simultaneously allowing others in. For instance, the townswomen who come to check on Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie are uncomfortable in the parlor and Lucille eventually leaves because she cannot handle the disestablishment of rules and structure. Conversely, the sheriff and the women of the town feel they must come in the house, and even that it is their duty because of the material evidence of poor housekeeping. Sylvie's hoarding, then, is an attempt to draw new lines of protection and shelter for herself and, by extension, for Ruth and Lucille. The unfortunate side effect of this attempt is that it draws attention to her unconventional home-making efforts and, in another moment of boundary permeability, allows the public (the law, the eyes of the town, etc.) into her private space.

Sylvie is not the only figure in the novel to reject the pull of consumerism in favor of a more experimental interaction with things. Ruth, too, finds little value in the things that can be bought in the general store or in Lucille's attempts to make her conform to respectable standards by changing her attire. Instead, Ruth recognizes the impermanence of physical objects. She rejects the path her sister takes partly because she does not understand the point of the conventional drive to conform to a pre-established and homogenized norm, but also because to do so would weaken her hold on the memory of her mother, her current relationship with her Aunt Sylvie, and as an extension of these, on herself. Ruth's relationship to the material things of the world is a complex one. Sinead McDermott, for example, argues that Ruth feels a "need for the past" that she manifests in an "attachment to souvenirs and [a] consciousness of 'the life in perished things'" (265). Ruth longs for connection to family and memory—

particularly the fading memory of her mother—and believes she might achieve this by retrieving lost objects: “It seemed to me that what perished need not also be lost. At Sylvie’s house, my grandmother’s house, so much of what I remembered I could hold in my hand—like a china cup, or a windfall apple, sour and cold from its affinity with deep earth” (124).⁷⁶ The power of objects lies in their ability to recall those who have perished and to connect her with the place where they lived, with “deep earth.” Ruth finds power in the objects her family owned because they suggest to her a connection to family and to a shared history. Susan Stewart argues that “The souvenir involves the displacement of attention into the past. The souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past” (151). Ruth is actively engaged in an attempt to pull the past into her present life, despite the impossibility of the task. Ruth feels that “To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow” (152). She, like her grandmother, who understood that “love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate” (12), feels the tug of things even at the same time as she knows that giving in to her desire for them will not assuage her longing. Ruth’s particular longing is for her absent mother. As such, regardless of her intellectual understanding of the complex power of objects, Ruth is unable to resist the pull of the objects that connect her to her mother and to her past. The novel portrays Ruth in almost constant reflection on the past. The moments in the novel that show Ruth interacting with the current moment rarely

⁷⁶ The choice of objects/images here—a china cup and an apple—signify Ruth’s desire to merge her domestic space and the natural world.

escape a comparison with past events, or conjectures on how her mother or Sylvie would have responded in her situation.

The narrative tells and retells Helen's story, adding new details as the novel progresses. Ruth's compilation of memories and images helps her to maintain her mother in an almost tangible way. Even when Ruth spends time with Sylvie, she imagines that she is with her lost mother and holds tight to these experiences as though they are true memories of her past that she can store away as one might collect tangible things. Ruth thinks about her mother that,

It was so very long since the dark had swum her hair, and there was nothing more to dream of, but often she almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she, and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. (159-160)

Lucille's memory of her mother has altered to allow for a woman who cared for them well and accidentally drove her car off a cliff. Ruth's memories, however, are faithful to the truth and recognize in her mother a justified pain and sorrow as well as the ability to willingly abandon her children and kill herself. Ruth's memories are almost like material objects that she can hold up to the light, examining their flaws and potential to hurt or help her. What she seems unable to do is to separate these memories from her contemporary reality in order to establish an identity of her own. Perpetually the

abandoned child in the woods, Ruth must cling to the things that give her a history and a place to be since she is unable to do this on her own.

While objects are potential talismans for Ruth, she also recognizes the futility of attaching importance and meaning to things because they are both unreliable and fleeting:

the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother's house was deceptive. It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases full of almanacs and Kipling and Defoe. For all the appearance these things gave of substance and solidity, they might better be considered a dangerous weight on a frail structure. (158-59)

Objects in Ruth's mind bear the traces of those who have handled them, and the weight and importance that society attaches to them, but they are not something to depend on. As Stewart suggests, "The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph" (151). Ruth is unsettled by the idea that objects often remain when we are gone and establish a history and mythology of both place and owner. This power to tell stories, sometimes deceptively so, engenders Ruth's distrust of objects. There is no stability or truth to be found in objects. Much as she is drawn to the things that connect her tangibly to her mother, Helen, and her grandmother, Ruth prefers memory to objects.

Ruth is powerfully, if problematically, connected to the physical space and objects of home that tie her to her mother, and to her past; she is also repelled by the idea of traditional domesticity and its binding rules. The tension between Ruth's most

powerful longings is revealed through her interactions with her home space, the liminal spaces on the boundaries of the domestic, the wild spaces beyond, and the objects that she values and how she interacts with them. It can be argued that Ruth's transient life begins long before she takes to the road with Sylvie; likewise, Ruth never forsakes those aspects of domesticity that she values most—the memories of and links to her mother and sister—even after she moves out of the home space at the end of the novel. The value of this text lies in the enigma of Ruth's longing. Unable to reverse the events of the past to undo her mother's suicide, Ruth finds comfort in the space where her mother once lived and in the company of Sylvie, a woman so very like Helen. But her comfort also imprisons her in a domestic life that she and Sylvie cannot, and will not, maintain. Robinson withholds a simple message about whether the road holds more or less potential for Ruth than home did, thereby allowing readers to imagine combinations rather than exclusions of home or wandering.

Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here*

I was used to waiting. Our life in that house, where the furniture seemed to pin the floors to the ground and dense shafts of sunlight came alive with particles of dust, despite my grandmother's conscientious cleaning, seemed to be a temporary arrangement, like an unscheduled delay in a remote train station, best slept through.
— Mona Simpson, *Anywhere but Here*

Many of the central conflicts in *Housekeeping*—how to negotiate movement and whether or not it will be, or should be, a permanent part of Ruth and Sylvie's lives, the extent to which the bounds of home and housekeeping will be embraced or rejected, and

how the ideology of home determines female subjectivity—are also at work in Mona Simpson’s *Anywhere but Here*. In *Housekeeping*, movement is powerful because it is mysterious and largely forbidden. Sylvie and Ruth do not fully give themselves over to movement until the end of the novel, and it is partially this resistance to the pull of the road that allows transience to maintain its allure throughout the text. Alternatively, *Anywhere but Here* begins in motion. Ann and her mother Adele are literally on the road, and the novel undermines the romance of journeying in its very first line, “We fought” (3). Contrary to the genial relationship between Sylvie and Ruth, Adele and Ann find that their closer familial bond does not guarantee harmony of purpose. Though they journey together with seemingly corresponding goals, their forward motion is frequently halted when one or the other fails to live up to expectations or to maintain the fiction that their travel is taking them to a better life.⁷⁷ The novel foregrounds both movement and the conflicts caused by it. The allure of the road is powerful in the novel, but Simpson suggests that “the road” is never straightforward, or even singular, for women and that its mystique is often a façade.

The central conflict in the narrative lies in the struggle between Adele and Ann to determine the worth of freedom and domestic stability. As women alone on the open road, they are just as visibly differentiated from the upper-class women they hope to become, as Sylvie is from Lucille’s home economics teacher. They are out of bounds on the road and unsituated in their many houses. Their financial instability, their isolation,

⁷⁷ A number of critics, including Donald J. Greiner and Deborah Denenholz Morse, focus on “the mother-daughter relationship to explore the darker side of the American need to head west in order to convert dreams into life” (Greiner 82).

and their womanhood all require that they engage a social structure of consumption and patriarchal order that defines the desires and the actions that are appropriate for them and that threatens to deprive them of any kind of empowered selfhood. In its struggle to balance motion and stability, the novel combines ideologies of home and public spaces, ultimately calling attention to the difficulty women still have in maintaining autonomous selfhood in either sphere.

Anywhere but Here, set in the 1950s and 1960s, tells the story of Adele August and her daughter Ann in motion. The novel opens in what we soon learn is a common moment of disagreement between Adele and twelve-year-old Ann. Ann and Adele have left their home town of Bay City, Wisconsin, and are headed to California in a long-shot attempt to parlay Ann's good looks into stardom. In the opening scene, Ann is angry with her mother because Ann believes Adele has made another promise that turned out to be false: "She said there'd be an Indian reservation. She said that we'd see buffalo in Texas. My mother said a lot of things" (3). But the fantasy of the trip, a journey that mother and daughter have talked about in moments of difficulty and trial, and have held up for years as a kind of talisman against the tedium and emptiness of the suburbs, is failing to come to light. Rather than being a grand adventure, the road trip becomes little more than a stream of highways and hotels that merge into one another, incomprehensibly similar to Ann and merely a prelude to their similarly disappointing lives in Los Angeles.

Most troubling to Ann is the notion that, in order to chase her own dreams, she must leave behind the security and comfort of her grandmother's house. Ann is

strikingly similar to Ruth in this way, since Ruth also feels the pull of her grandmother's house, even as she is drawn to the road. Ann's grandmother's house on Lime Kiln Road figures prominently in Ann's childhood memories and is the only stable place she has ever known.⁷⁸ Adele and her first husband, Ann's father, moved into the house when Adele was pregnant and Ann lived there with both of her parents as a baby and young girl. It is a simple house outside the city limits, surrounded by fields and a few neighbors. Ann's grandmother is a widow but still maintains her home according to traditional standards of good housekeeping: she tends the yard and garden, she bakes, and she keeps a frugal and, to Ann, comforting routine. The familiarity of the place, and the fact that it has been much lived-in and used, is what Ann finds so appealing. She considers the differences between the life her mother wants for her and the life her grandmother might provide, musing that "the plates she [Ann's grandmother] used for every day were white with a faded gold line around their rims. The china was scratched from knives and some of the plates were chipped, but I'd known them all my life" (50). After Adele remarries and she and Ann move to a new house in town, Adele still brings Ann to the house on Lime Kiln Road whenever "she got mad enough" (50). The house is a refuge for Ann when she is afraid of her mother: "Even in my dreams, when I was chased and running, I saw yellow lights in the kitchen, the blue back of my grandmother's dress as she bent over to reach a low cupboard. My grandmother was almost always home" (50). Ann's comforting and nostalgic dream vision of her grandmother's lighted house suggests that Ann might desire stability more than mobility.

⁷⁸ Again, like Ruth, the reality of the place or the time spent there is less important than the memories that Ann carries with her about her grandmother's house.

The image acts as an interesting contrast to Ruth's description of her house as she looks into it from the orchard. By the time Ruth has her vision, she knows the house to be a meager shelter from the dangers of the world and no cover against the prying eyes and capturing hands of the town. Ruth understands the threat she is under and believes that "the fragility of [her] household was by now so great that the breach was inevitable" (188). Ann, by contrast, is more threatened by the uncertainty of the road, and carries her memories of the house with her throughout her life as a guard against the loneliness and fear she feels so far from home.

When Adele takes Ann to the house on Lime Kiln Road it is a way for her to free herself of the responsibility of motherhood, similar to when Helen leaves Ruth and Lucille at *their* grandmother's house. Although Adele, unlike Helen, returns for her daughter after her fits of anger have passed, her actions nonetheless push Ann away from her and indicate a strong desire to be independent and free. Where Ann is comforted by the house on Lime Kiln Road, the house holds a different potency for Adele. The house is a roadblock in Adele's life.⁷⁹ She remembers her childhood and adolescence there as one that separated her from other people and from opportunities. But the pull of home is still strong:

She [Adele] did not like the house, she would never have chosen it, but it was the only place I [Ann] saw her thin shoulders fall, where she hooked her jacket on a peg instead of buttoning it up around a hanger. Her legs

⁷⁹ Adele might be thought of as an amalgam of Helen and Sylvie. She is like Helen in her desire to be rid of her child and free. Her desire for motion ties her to both women, but her repeated return to her childhood home, a house that represents all of the limits placed on her life, is similar to Sylvie's return.

swung under the table and her smile came easily to me, no matter what I'd done, no matter how bad I'd been. She was tired and home. (50)

The house is an ambiguous space for Adele, equally encumbering and embracing. It is the place that she has always come back to in moments of crisis; the very act of having to return is a failure to maintain the easy life she believes most other people lead. The ambiguity of Adele's feelings toward her childhood home is echoed throughout the novel in her responses to other domestic spaces. Born just before World War II, Adele's understanding of a woman's place within the home is colored by her mother's traditional perspective and her awareness of the expanded possibilities for women in the work force. She grew up in a moment progressive enough to allow her to obtain a graduate degree but not yet open minded enough to allow her to leave home and live on her own. Her need both to flee the confines of domesticity and to establish a tasteful home reflects a common crisis in the United States, particularly for women who grew up in the 1950s and beyond.

Adele is reminiscent of *Housekeeping*'s Lucille in that more than anything Adele worries that other people will think that she is "white trash." Although she grew up financially secure and has a graduate degree, Adele focuses on the house on Lime Kiln Road and the embarrassment she felt during high school and college when she had to bring boyfriends there. The small oddities about her family and the house—her father's mink cages behind the house, and the junk heaped in the Grilling family's front yard across the street—shame her. Just as Lucille fears that the people of Fingerbone will lump her in with Ruth and Sylvie if she associates with them too closely, Adele believes

that others will see her home's working-class indicators of hard work and financial insecurity and associate her with such "trashiness." Adele values visible markers of class. In an expensive china store in California Adele holds up a "plain white plate" so Ann can see how "fine it is." She admires its fragility, "that it was thin and there was a pearliness, like a film of water, over the surface" (11). This plate represents the kind of reputation Adele wants for herself and Ann. Holding the plate, she tells Ann that her "Granny was very elegant. Gramma isn't, she could be, but she isn't. We're like Granny. See, we belong here, [...]. We come from this" (11). Adele believes that class is something she can attain by surrounding herself with the right people, moving to the right place, and buying the right things. Her heritage isn't a place, or even a person, but a thing. The plate, the fact that her Granny "had a whole set" like it, and the fact that she recognizes its quality, signal to Adele that class is attainable. Adele's obsession with the idea that class is something that is visibly discernible and that can be bought works to maintain the very class ideologies that subjugate her.

It is this need to adhere to convention, to be seen as "classy," that leads Adele to marry Ted Diamond and move in to the house on Carriage Court, a "rectangular house with no windows" (37). This house is different in all respects from the house where Adele grew up. This house in the suburbs, that Ann derisively thinks "looks like a shoebox," adheres to the standards of middle-class respectability, but falls short of providing any of the standard comforts of home. Although they live there for three years, the house never has any furniture beyond beds to sleep in and televisions in each bedroom. The family eats "thick, wobbly steaks" every night or cold chateaubriand right

out of the refrigerator because there is nowhere to sit down and because it means not having to dirty plates (38). They eat fashionable food, “decorate the inside of the refrigerator” with rows of condiments, and are careful not to dirty the “bright, chrome, new handle” of the appliances (38). Adele’s housekeeping presents an interesting contrast to Sylvie’s. Ironically, it is Adele’s need for respectability, as opposed to Sylvie’s indifference, that makes Adele’s house so strange and unconventional.

Financially unable to furnish the house in the style she desires, Adele does not furnish it at all. The outside of the house and the suburban neighborhood it is in are visible signs of Adele’s class, and, thus, the important aspects of the house. Inside the house, the markers of middle-class respectability are, therefore, smaller and more affordable.

Fearing that people will think her common, Adele chooses to be fashionable in the ways that she can. However, for all her attempts to maintain her household properly, Adele does not truly know how to nourish her daughter. Ann balks at the meals she is served and the rigid rules that maintain a pristine but cold house and Adele seems not to notice. Adele’s ability to mother is inextricably bound to her ability to be properly domestic, something that she cannot, and is unwilling, to be.⁸⁰

Adele’s desires for a more glamorous life, and for the freedom that motion might afford her, pushes her to leave her hometown and head for California. While Ann also longs to go, her motives for leaving Wisconsin are quite different, and often less clear,

⁸⁰ A number of critics have noted Adele’s unconventional mothering in the novel and have largely argued that Adele does not embrace maternity because of her inappropriately close bond to her daughter. Deborah Denenholz Morse says of Adele that she “finds it difficult to conceive of Ann as a separate being” and notes that Adele “often talks to [Ann] ‘as if she were alone’” (72). It is Morse’s contention that Adele “feels the pride of the creator, and she assumes godlike power over the child she has made” (73). Throughout the novel, Adele uses Ann as an outlet for her many frustrations and on more than one occasion harasses and abuses Ann, psychologically, physically, and even sexually.

than Adele's are. Ann feels just as alone and confined in the house on Carriage Court as Adele did in her childhood home. Ann considers her mother's failure to provide for her, emotionally as well as domestically (by furnishing the house and taking over the care and cleaning of the domestic space so that Ann can be a child), and believes that moving away from this failed domestic space will allow for a new kind of home life that might suit them both. It is for this reason that Adele's suggestion that she and Ann run away to California speaks so strongly to Ann. In the years before they leave town, Ann hopes and wishes to go, but it is more the idea of change than the reality of California that interests her. Delays to the journey condemn her to a life of confinement and she notes, "I didn't feel like I would go anywhere anymore, like California. I knew I'd stay here in the back of the house, facing the back of things" (50).⁸¹ But when the time actually comes to move, she realizes that she is not only moving toward a new life but is also leaving behind her family and her grandmother's house, the only place she has ever felt she belonged. She reflects on the move with wonder and helplessness, thinking, "It seemed to me then, as we stood there, for a long time on the verge of leaving, that we shouldn't have really had to go. Something had gone wrong" (61). When their new life in California ceases to be a midnight, secret fantasy between mother and daughter and becomes the reality of packing suitcases and saying goodbye, Ann realizes that she does not quite know why they have decided to go. When she recognizes that becoming mobile and risking a journey for an uncertain new life might lead to less rather than more

⁸¹ Ann's fear of being hidden at the back of the house, "facing the back of things," is strongly connected to Adele's tendency to value the surface appearance of things. It is significant that the *front* of things is meant to be displayed for, and viewed by, others. Remaining turned to the back links Ann's feelings of stagnation in her current domestic situation to an underlying need to live up to her mother's ideals of being something that could be proudly displayed.

security, Ann represents the struggle that all women face when they decide to leave a conservative home-life behind and search for something that allows them both security and freedom. Ann's feelings that either choice—staying put, or striking out—will require sacrifice speaks to the difficulty that women face when they step out of their expected roles. Ann and Adele will become free-floating subjects on the road with no safety net to catch them and no real precedent to guide them.

For Adele, the decision to leave the house on Carriage Court is tied to her need for movement. Just as Huck Finn and Dean Moriarty feel the pull of the journey and the need to go west, Adele is drawn to the open road as a path to a new life and to a new way of understanding herself. Adele and Ann's road trip necessarily evokes the long tradition of journey narratives in the United States and their tendency to focus on the adventuring and maturing of young men, often at the expense of women. However, *Anywhere but Here* suggests that young women on the road are limited in ways that men are not, and that women invite their own destruction if they believe that the masculine road story has room for them. Critic Alexandra Ganser argues that road stories, such as this one, "create an awareness for [sic] the spatial limitations, regulations, and restrictions at work whenever these women, constituted as a group by a shared 'being-perceived-as-female' in public, leave their assigned realm" (155). When Adele and Ann leave their family and their home in search of something that is for themselves alone, they reject a system of patriarchy that confines them to home and enter into a new and equally dangerous system of surveillance and scrutiny. By leaving the home space, they put themselves into the public space of the road. The difficulty Ann and Adele have in

the domestic realm is merely compounded once they take to the road. Since they are unable to leave their cares behind them—as their fictional male counterparts have done before them—Ann and Adele’s struggles call attention to the duplicity of the westward road myth for women.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty that Adele and Ann face in their attempt to find themselves by heading west is that a true refashioning of self is not available to them. They were mother and daughter before they left and they remain in that troubled relationship on the road.⁸² In an attempt to maintain a semblance of autonomy on the road, Adele wields power over Ann and metes out punishments when the mood strikes her. When Ann believes her mother has lied to her about the wonderful things they will see on their trip and refuses to speak, Adele responds with equally childish fervor by kicking her out of the car. Adele routinely deposits Ann on the side of the highway and drives away, leaving Ann to her punishment. Such behavior is frequent in the novel and signals Adele’s distaste for being a mother and her reluctance to live as others determine she should.⁸³ Jacqui Smyth suggests that Adele’s conduct in these cases should be “read as symbolic actions, as a release of the tensions of a woman who is shaped by [the strict family dynamic of the fifties] and who experiences a contrary, and unconscious, drive to resist it” (“Getaway Cars” 122). When Adele leaves Ann on the side of the road, she is

⁸² Jacqui Smyth focuses on the novel as, among other things, an exploration of the “mother outlaw,” a figure that breaks free of the confines of domesticity and patriarchal order, often taking to the open road, but who remains tied to rules of family and maternity.

⁸³ Adele’s behavior toward Ann is inconsistent in the novel. Often these moments of harsh punishment, easily read as Adele abandoning Ann, are followed by moments of intense closeness during which mother and daughter—sometimes benignly and sometimes troublingly—seem of one mind in their thoughts and desires. However, it is always the case that Adele is in a position of power from which she is able to determine the contours of their relationship, a relationship that she is as likely to reject as to embrace.

expressing a desire to be something other than a woman and mother who is thus required to attach herself to and define herself by her child. But these moments also highlight the threat of displacement that comes with being a vulnerable subject.

Each time Ann is physically displaced by her mother, her vulnerability stands in for the vulnerability of all women out of place. When Ann is pushed out on the side of the road, the narrative does not stay with Adele; instead, as with the novel as a whole, the tale is told by the one left behind. Such abrupt displacement cannot help but upset young Ann, but her first response to her banishment is wonder that the world continues to exist outside the bounds of the car: “It was always a shock the first minute because nothing outside was bad. [...] I stood there at first amazed that there was nothing horrible in the landscape” (3). Ann is unmoored of any knowable referents, and tries to identify the things she can see: “I tried hard but I couldn’t learn anything. The scenery all went strange, like a picture on a high billboard. The fields, the clouds, the sky; none of it helped because it had nothing to do with me” (4). As she will later do with memories of her grandmother and the house on Lime Kiln Road, Ann attempts to replace herself by making sense of the objects in her landscape and her connection to them. She discovers that the landscape she passes so quickly in the car actually exists in substantial form and that it might have something to offer her in its stillness, and that she had not really seen it before. Unfortunately, Ann is more used to movement and does not know how to make sense of a transitory landscape now that it has suddenly stood still. It has “nothing to do” with her because she is not from this place and cannot locate herself within its nature.

Standing on the shoulder of the highway, Ann is in a space between the road and the land that surrounds it. In this liminal space, Ann vacillates between her desire for movement and her desire for stability. Contradictory desires and ideologies come together in these moments of dislocation and speak to the potential, as well as the limitations, that mobile women might find in spaces outside of conventional domesticity. Ann embodies these contradictions as she stands on the roadside and considers her surroundings: she is now free but she has also been abandoned, she is alone but in public, mobile but only minimally since now she has to walk. Ann's mobility is limited because she is forced to rely on other people to get her from place to place. Unlike the men in typical journey narratives, Ann is unable to take off on her own, safe in the knowledge that adventure and friendship await her. The myth of freedom on the road is easily dismantled when told through Ann's eyes. When Adele does come back for Ann, she accomplishes a kind of repetition or "do-over" for both mother and daughter. In returning to get Ann, by literally having to double back and go over old ground, Adele enacts a rejection of blindly moving forward. Ann, too, by deigning to get back in the car, goes back on her wishes for stability and chooses her mother instead.

In between their homes in Wisconsin and their apartments in California, Adele and Ann occupy various dwellings on the road. They usually stop at one of a series of cheap road-side motels because they are the only places that will take the gas card that Adele stole from her husband before she left: "They were called Travel Lodges and their signs each outlined a bear in a nightcap, sleepwalking. They were dull motels, lonely, and they were pretty cheap, which bothered my mother because she would have liked to

charge high bills to Ted” (5). Ann and Adele believe that they are travelers, that they are headed to a specific destination with concrete goals in mind. In truth, they are transients. Unlike Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, however, Ann and Adele do not long for this kind of life. While they feel somewhat empowered by their movement and their rejection of the domesticity they have left behind them in Wisconsin, their actual freedom is a meager one. They do not make choices about where they will stop or where they will sleep, being forced, instead, to bunk down in the cheap rooms that Ted’s credit card will buy them. On the road, they are thrust deeply into the kind of life that they fear most; they are severely limited financially and their accommodations and dining options—both of these representing their domesticity on the road—leave them feeling contaminated and hemmed in. They fear that the motel rooms are dirty, and Adele gives up on keeping Ann clean because they are “nowhere and she didn’t care what [Ann] looked like in the coffee shop” (6). The repetitions they engage in while on the road further complicate their sense of being freely mobile. The similarity of the hotels—their spot next to the highway, the metal chairs on the porch outside each room, the spotty, paper-covered water glasses—troubles their sense of forward motion. Despite the miles they cover each day, they end up in the same place each night. The repetition of always-the-same motel rooms causes a sense of displacement and threatens to remove identity entirely. Stripping a place of its identifying markers likewise removes an individual’s sense of self. On the road, Ann and Adele are always moving, and always nowhere.

When Ann and Adele finally get to Los Angeles, they are faced with the challenge of maintaining their sense of freedom while staying in one place. Throughout

the novel, the physical space of home is multiplied and often obscured by Ann and Adele's mobility and their desire for motion. The action of this novel ostensibly focuses on the attempts of a mother and daughter to find a place that will allow them to stop moving and enjoy the comforts of a stable home. What they really seek is something more elusive and complex. Often, their motion seems to work in the service of domesticity, in that Adele and Ann move from place to place in their attempt to find and sustain a home life and a home space. And it is true that much of their movement takes them from one residence to another. But the houses they inhabit are not the true aim of their movement; rather they are simply places to stay when Adele's desires for motion are thwarted. When they arrive in Los Angeles, they initially have no place to live and are forced to stay in hotels. They start out in the upscale Bel-Air Hotel but when their money begins to run out, they move into a much shabbier hotel that rents rooms by the month. They are immediately struck by how out of place they are in their new surroundings and compensate by establishing as many routines as they can: "We went to the same place for dinner every night, the Hamburger Hamlet in Westwood, and we tried to sit in the same booth. We ordered the same food every night, too. There was enough new in our lives" (173). Again, their home space is transitory and unsatisfactory and makes them feel vulnerable. With so little to connect them to their new lives, they retreat to their car. When Adele bought the car, she was drawn to it because of its luxury and its potential to convey the right message about Ann and Adele to those who did not know them. She recognizes the importance of appearances and thinks, "'This way, we won't have the house, but we'll have a car to let people know who we are a little.' [...] 'Maybe

out there where everyone's in apartments, it goes a little more by the car. Because we won't have a house or anything, but maybe this will help. They can see we came out of something'" (122).⁸⁴ Even before leaving Wisconsin, Adele seems to understand that the car will be their security. They know they might not have a house, and indeed, they never do manage home ownership, but they will always be able to get in the car and let people know "who they are."

The car not only signals to the casual observer that Ann and Adele are of the "right class," it also functions as a place to escape to and as a mode of escape from those things that frighten or threaten them. But depending on the car for safety inadvertently enacts a life of perpetual motion. As a tool of liberation, the car is limited.⁸⁵ Ann and Adele are unsure of where they are going, or even of where they want to go, and so their driving becomes habitual and obsessive rather than freeing. As the epigraph to *Anywhere but Here* suggests, movement without purpose can become a compulsion: "There are three wants which can never be satisfied; that of the rich wanting more, that of the sick, wanting something different, and that of the traveler who says, 'anywhere but here.'" Their dependence on the car accustoms them to a life of wandering. Rather than going home after work and school, they often drive around the neighborhoods they wish they lived in. Houses might be the focal point of this ritual, but it is the act of movement that

⁸⁴ This image of the car as something that has the potential to confer a new subjectivity, even a new life, on Adele and Ann is intriguingly linked to the idea of the car as both a vessel of opportunity and a womb (as a place from which they are born and also as a place of safety). The image is further ambiguous in its association with a turmoil that one lives through and "comes out of." The combined associations of the car with the conflicting safety and confinement of a womb, a vessel that removes Ann and Adele from a painful situation, and a "vehicle" of a new kind of life are explored throughout the novel.

⁸⁵ This idea works counter to the widely held belief in the car, in mid-century America, as a means of freedom, expression, and limitless potential. This novel subverts this idea by embracing it to highlight the ways in which cars are more complicated symbols for women.

comforts them. They believe that they are actively searching for the right kind of life on their drives, that they are dreaming of the places where they want to live and planning ways to achieve that. And in some senses, they are. More importantly, when they point their headlights across the expansive lawn of a house they will never be able to afford, they establish the boundary between themselves and a lifestyle of which they are not a part. They stay in the car and it carries them over the same territory day after day.

As a stand in for a constant and secure home, the car offers a plausible combination of the best aspects of transience and domesticity: it functions as a place to be and as home, and also as a means of getting away. In *Housekeeping*, transience and domesticity are brought together by Sylvie herself through her attempts to break down the traditional boundaries between movement/the road and stability/home and to pull the best of each into a lifestyle that worked for her, and potentially for Ruth as well. In *Anywhere but Here*, Adele too endeavors to find a balance between the stability and social acceptability of homemaking and the freedom that movement affords her. For Adele, these often-contradictory stimuli come together in her car. The representation of the car as a mobile home rather than as a means of completely escaping home, also works to separate this text from its male-centered counterparts.⁸⁶ In traditional tales of westward movement and adventuring, the car is a clear way to escape from home and to

⁸⁶ See Deborah Paes de Barros's *Fast Cars and Bad Girls* for an excellent study of the female road stories in American literature. Much of her discussion of *Anywhere but Here* argues for reading the novel as maternal road novel in which the road is seen as a path to understanding and connection between Ann and Adele. While Ann does come to terms with her mother by the end of the novel, I would argue that this is *despite* her journeys with her mother and because of her individual movement away. The novel opens up a space for discussion about the possibilities of combining family/domesticity and freedom/movement but clear paths to such arrangements are absent. In placing women within a traditionally male-centered road narrative Simpson reconceptualizes the road narrative, not by making a new space for women within it, but by demanding that the narrative be changed.

move into a wild and public realm that largely excluded and eschewed women—the novel *On the Road*, and films *Easy Rider* and *Thelma and Louise* are well-known examples of road narratives that either leave women out entirely or present women on the road who have abandoned their families and face danger and violence because of it. When Ann and Adele take to the road they might individually be stripped of their identities, but they are also creating a new space in which women might combine the public and the private spheres, thereby inventing new ways to know themselves in the world. Deborah Paes de Barros draws on Braidotti's theories and argues that this kind of movement marks Adele and Ann as nomads:

Just as there is no final point or destination, the nomad (unlike the wandering road hero) has no space of origin. This lack of origination or destination is significant because these missing finite determinants place the nomad outside of the system of capital—a system that must culminate with the finality of production—and apart from the legitimacy conferred by clear origination. (8)

It is fruitful to think about Ann and Adele as nomadic subjects, roaming from place to place with no concerns about past or future histories or spaces. Certainly Adele's relationship to the road might be thought of in this way and her movement is even more radical and potentially groundbreaking for it, but it is difficult to consider Ann as a subject with no feelings of nostalgia either for a past or future place with which to identify. She accompanies her mother on the road but its potential to free her of the systems of oppression associated with gender and conventional family frameworks and

expectations are weakened because she rarely makes her own decisions and must, as a young girl, stay with her mother. Ann and Adele bring home with them whenever they get into the car together. As mother and daughter traveling together, it is impossible for them ever truly to leave the bonds of home behind. Adele has grand hopes for their lives in California but the Lincoln (an overtly hyper-American symbol) fails to secure them access to financial stability, romantic involvement, or class mobility. de Barros argues that Ann and Adele perpetuate a life of transience by returning to their car again and again while they look longingly at the domestic spaces they will never acquire.

For Ann, the car becomes a replacement for a traditional home in a more literal sense. Throughout the text, she repeatedly envisions cars as safe places to hide when her home becomes too confusing or dangerous for her. The car is a place of safety and constancy in a way that the houses she lives in can never be, and combines her desire for something more expansive out of life and her need for the comfort and security of a space that stays the same. On one of Adele's many trips to tour houses that they will never buy, Ann wanders into the absent college-girl's bedroom and imagines what her life would be like if she could live in a nice house with nice things: "I leaned back and imagined the girl away at college. I thought if I lived here, with this bed and this bulletin board, the regular desk and dresser, I would have this kind of life. Nothing to hide. The girl left her room and went to college and people could walk through and see it" (14). But Ann's home life cannot hold up to such scrutiny. In the house on Carriage Court, she lives for years without furniture; on the road, she lives in sleazy motels; in Los Angeles, she lives in a series of run-down apartments that they can never quite afford and never

seem to become home. Her home spaces open her life up to the surveillance of neighbors and landlords and offer her no real comfort. Cars, on the other hand, become a way to contend with a life lived in the public eye, while maintaining a sense of stability and security. On a snowy night while she still lives in Wisconsin, Ann sneaks out of her house so that she can sleep in the new Lincoln. With blankets in her hand, she peers into the car: "Through the windows, the inside looked safe and closed and tended like a home" (71). On another occasion, arriving at her grandmother's house late at night after running away from home she decides that she would rather sleep in her grandmother's car than in the house: "The house was dark and quiet, cool, wrapped in wind. I heard branches ticking against the high windows like fingernails. I decided to sleep in the Oldsmobile" (106). As Clarke notes, cars become substitutes for a house that is "an unattainable ideal" (161). Since Ann does not find security in her home, she searches for something that she can control. The cars work in this way because the interiors are small enough to make her feel safe and their exteriors convey nothing of the shame she feels in her home spaces.

In her travels with her mother, Ann believes that motion, and being in the car, is preferable to anything they might find if they stopped. She longs to stay in that familiar spot that paradoxically is never in the same place for very long: "I never wanted to move from my seat. I wanted my mother to keep driving and driving" (116). One crucial difference between Ann's and Adele's desire for motion, and a distinction that draws particular attention to the notion of Ann (and by extension all women with little access to power) as a displaced and largely subordinate subject, is the fact that Adele is the only

one who can actually do the driving. Although Ann is often mobile, she does not typically get to decide the direction of her movement. Unable to control the car, Ann's mobility is largely limited to where her feet can carry her. Therefore, when Ann rejects her powerless role within the car and strikes out on foot, she is attempting to take control of her own life by mobilizing her body. But doing so puts her body in peril. She is linked to "street walkers" and transients in clear and dangerous ways in these moments. In *Housekeeping*, Sylvie is classified most readily as the wrong kind of woman, and the wrong kind of citizen, when she is seen walking. Sylvie's habits outside of her home make her vulnerable to judgment by the townspeople about her mobile life as well as her life within the home. As a woman, Sylvie is expected to stay indoors or on her own property; when the townspeople see her in the park, or by the lake, or in the train station, they see her as a woman who is flaunting her disregard for convention and who is probably a threat. Movement, walking in Ann's case, erases the restrictive barriers between public and private space, but it removes protective barriers as well. When Ann moves outside the sphere of her mother's influence and protection, she becomes visible in new ways and thus vulnerable to violence.⁸⁷

This violence is manifested almost immediately upon Ann's separation from her mother. Before they move to the house on Carriage Court, Ann is granted permission to go trick-or-treating with her cousin Benny and without parents. Ann and her friend Theresa are the only girls in the party and this makes them easy prey. A group of boys

⁸⁷ Ganser discusses the movement of women outside of the private space of the home as being "informed by a 'geography of fear' that links the female body in public space to a sexual vulnerability and the threat of sexual assault" that comes about when the female body becomes "public property" ("Getaway Cars" 159).

attacks the girls, knocking them down and threatening sexual violence: “They pushed us down in the dirt and we both screamed. One pulled up my sheet and grinned at me. [...] The other guy was pressing down Theresa’s shoulders. He leaned over and kissed her, making fake smooching sounds” (352). Ann and Theresa are clearly targeted for this simulated rape because they are girls alone in public. Even Benny ignores Ann’s pleas for help, seeming to recognize a power stronger than family at work as the boys punish the girls for stepping out of bounds. Ann suffers the most profound violation, not when she is physically injured, but when a boy cuts off her hair: “I heard the scissors clicking, the short, snuffling noises the hair made when it came off. Benny knew about my hair, [...] It was unusual. Everyone said that about my hair. It was pure black. [...] I just wanted my hair back, that was all I wanted and all I could imagine ever wanting” (353). In cutting her hair, the boy has sheared Ann of her sense of individuality, more, her sense of specialness. The boys violate that part of her that most marks her as feminine. Her body has been defiled and her beauty removed because she dared to claim a public space, and a male-dominated practice. After the incident, she is left alone in the dark and forced to walk back home. A night that began by celebrating the ability of girls and women to move about on their own ends with mobility being squashed and movement meted out as punishment.

Ann’s conflicted feelings about home and mobility are most clearly seen when she walks. One afternoon, in a particularly vicious incident of abandonment, Adele drives Ann out to the country and leaves her on the side of the road outside a home for wayward and orphaned girls. When she realizes that her mother is not coming back for

her, she dashes across the highway that separates the woods from the girl's home and starts walking back to town. She tries hitchhiking but realizes that her mud-splattered jeans make her a figure of contempt and no one respectable will stop for her. The man who does pick her up seems dangerous and Ann gets out of his truck as soon as she can. Once Ann is on her own again, the world seems ominously dark and threatening. Walking where she hopes her mother might find her, Ann skirts the border of civilization/safety and wilderness/danger:

The sidewalk I was walking on now, halfway across the water, was steel mesh, too, [...] I looked at my dirty sock and my dirty shoe from the puddle [...] the worst thing is you are alone. You always know. When you can't even sink, you can't stop, you can't let yourself. The dream of stopping, the desire, is like a pill. There is no one to hold your dead weight, so you always come back to yourself and you have to move again, your right foot and your left, the same. (104)

Ann is thoroughly isolated when she walks the streets, sidewalks, and fields to her grandmother's house. Her vulnerability is represented by her coal-blackened shoes and in the sucking mud under the overpass.⁸⁸ The boundaries between domesticity and transience that the novel explores throughout are manifested in this scene's focus on the blurred borders between Ann's body and her surroundings. Having been forcefully displaced from her family/home Ann depends upon her body to move her through the

⁸⁸ The mud that pulls at Ann's feet, that dirties her, puts her in danger, and connects her symbolically to the abject and to death, can be tied further to the mud that stops Helen's car in *Housekeeping*. Ironically, Helen's mud staved off the inevitable plunge into darkness and death, rather than being the cause of it.

world and finds that body inundated by filth. The concept of a body overwhelmed by dirt and debris is repeated throughout the novel and indicates danger for women who move outside of the confines of the home. The slippery margins between inside and out—represented by home and transience, the car and the roadside, and, as I will discuss at more length, the body and dirt—highlight the difficulties women encounter when they elect to be mobile; that the margins are always being overtaken, that they are not solid or secure, further indicates that women will have as hard a time finding a workable, empowering narrative within the road myth.

Despite this difficulty, however, the mere fact of Ann's movement is empowering because it takes her away from her mother and allows her to make her own decisions. Further, since Ann walks, it makes room for a female narrative of movement that rejects both the car and the road itself as necessary modes of mobility. But her power is undermined somewhat by the fact that she moves not toward a new life but toward one that she wishes she could recapture. Initially, Ann walks along the side of the road so that her mother will see her if she comes looking for her. She imagines their reunion as one of beauty and peace: "She'd brake the car, get out—the world would stop in light" (103). But Ann knows no one is coming for her and, rather than search for her mother, she aims in the direction of a space that has offered her sanctuary in the past: her grandmother's house. During this short journey Ann passes through a wood and imagines that it offers domestic comforts to her such as "warm spots and long cooler corridors, as in a house" (105). But it is also a frightening space where the very air "touched behind your knees, your neck, the soft part of your cheek that bruises" (105).

Ann is afraid to look behind her and moves quickly through the space, “walking fast, tripping,” and is relieved to find a clearing and “finally [...] step out of the woods” (105). Once out, she finds the railroad track and is able to orient herself toward safety. The presence of the railroad track is ironic and complex, tied as it is to images of tramps and transience. The track takes Ann away from what ought to be her home (her mother) but also toward a space that readers recognize as a safer, as well as a more conventional space: the house on Lime Kiln Road. The paradox of the railroad tracks on which Ann “balanced”⁸⁹ is the paradox of the novel. Both in moving away from her mother’s car (and by extension, her home) and by rejecting the road in favor of a path through nature (Ann crosses fields, streams, and through stands of trees on her way to her grandmother’s house) Ann attempts to reorder her world by realigning herself within space. Unfortunately, her attempts merely reaffirm that the spaces available to her offer little more than entrapment.

Ganser argues that the spatial refiguring that occurs in female road novels depends specifically on engaging dangerous spaces:

It is exactly by facing these “dangerous” spaces, using them as the setting of their narrative worlds, that women’s road narratives are able to remap the road. In that they question, subvert, and/or appropriate the trope of confined mobility by creating not “a road,” but many “roads of their

⁸⁹ Ann literally balances on the railroad tracks and is even able to walk all the way to her grandmother’s house with her eyes closed. Her balancing resonates symbolically in that it indicates Ann’s inability to live comfortably as either entirely mobile or entirely settled. Ann’s use of the railroad track to find her way back to a place of security is, thus, entirely apt.

own,” that they also construct transient, fluid, and deterritorialized female subjectivities that repeatedly escape spatial confinement. (163)

Both Ann and Adele engage dangerous spaces and must adjust their mental coordinates, so to speak, in order to avoid being overtaken by such spaces. The spaces that most frequently endanger Adele are relatively benign domestic spaces. The greatest threat that she faces is the lure of class that pulls her toward traditional homes and the trappings of consumerism. In resistance to the perceived stifling effect of such spaces, Adele becomes hyper-mobile, both in her journey to California and after she gets there. The impetus for her mobility is a restructuring of her life and her subjectivity in the world. Ann’s movement is more complex in that it usually lacks clear direction. Ann repeatedly imagines new roads for herself, roads that move her toward and away from her mother, and toward and away from the kind of independence for which she, as an adolescent, is unprepared. Ann’s lack of direction, easily recognizable in the scene above, allows her to be powerfully mobile while acknowledging the difficulty of moving into dangerous spaces and the possibility of desiring a home to which she can return.

Ann’s simultaneous, and often contradictory, need for the steadiness that a home might bring and her desire to move away from her mother and out on her own often leaves her trapped. The stability she needs is most frequently represented in her memories of her grandmother’s house. Sometimes, though, she wants nothing more than to find constancy in her mother’s house, her own house. But the houses that Ann and Adele inhabit throughout the text, and particularly once they get to Los Angeles, are houses of Adele’s making and do not reflect Ann’s desires. Rather than exhibiting a

comfortable relationship with domesticity, these domestic spaces announce Adele's resistance to permanence or rootedness. Once in California, Adele's resistance to buying furniture or cooking meals (preferring to go out to dinner at the same restaurants night after night) seems a clear refusal of domesticity itself.⁹⁰ Specifically, Adele is resisting a kind of domesticity that she believes is beneath her. She is angry at their substandard housing and her inability to snag a rich husband. Moreover, she is resentful of the demands placed upon her to be a proper caretaker and homemaker. The novel supports this interpretation when Ann reflects on her home life:

It was stubbornness. My mother didn't want this to be our life. She'd do it a day at a time, she'd put up with it, but she wasn't going to *plan* for it.

We didn't pay bills, we didn't buy groceries, we bounced checks.

Accepting our duties might have meant we were stuck forever. We made it so we couldn't keep going the way we were; something had to happen.

But the thing was, it never did. (439-440)

Simpson's use of the word "stuck" in this passage suggests that domesticity is not a final solution but rather something to work one's way out of. Critic Donald J. Greiner suggests that Adele's odd behavior and unusual attitude toward homemaking signals a refusal to participate in the duties of female domesticity, and further, that her refusal indicates her understanding that women form dangerous bonds with one another, and, thus, to a patriarchal order that oppresses them, when they participate in housekeeping.

⁹⁰ While Adele's response to domesticity in Wisconsin, especially in the Carriage Court house, reflects a conflicted desire to put forth the right domestic appearance, Adele and Ann are more isolated in Los Angeles where few people know them or know where they live. Thus, acts of domesticity often involve housekeeping chores that Adele knows will be seen only by the two of them.

In other words, Adele is aware of the ways in which women establish control over one another, and maintain the status quo when they judge one another by their ability to properly perform women's work. Just as the townswomen in *Housekeeping* help to label Sylvie as unfit to care for Ruth and Lucille, Adele has been taught by other women—her mother and her sister specifically—that she must maintain her house in a certain way. Greiner argues that “Simpson parodies Adele's housekeeping. [...] suggest[ing] that the ordered house is a misguided coercion *by* females. Adele's refusal to buy furniture, even though she indulges in obsessive binges of cleaning, illustrates her reluctance to adapt to the standard woman's role of homemaker” (86, my emphasis). Adele's simultaneous involvement in homemaking (she desires a nice house, and occasionally becomes obsessive about housework) and fierce resentment indicate the complexity of Adele's position as a woman who is searching for both freedom and the “right” kind of domesticity. Smyth argues that Adele's negligent housekeeping reflects an “urge to destroy the domestic” that overrules any need she might feel for security and acceptance (“Getaway Cars” 116). However, such a stance ignores Adele's manic housekeeping and the fact she often uses housekeeping as a way of keeping Ann bonded to her, thus *maintaining* domesticity in the form of an intact family unit.

What is clear is that Adele's day-to-day response to domesticity is more complicated than simple resentment toward a controlling patriarchal system that would keep women tied to the home. Just as Sylvie rejects the ideological constraints of domesticity at the same time as she occasionally takes up a broom and attempts to bring the house up to the standards of the town, Adele is conflicted about how to thrust off the

demands of domesticity while also making a conventional success of her life. While she wants no part of the confines of domesticity, or of the duties that come with being a wife and mother in the 1950s and 1960s, she also fears the stigma that comes with a neglected or inferior home, and the social reproach that such a home would incur. Before they move to California, Adele reminds Ann of the financial risk of their move: “remember, Honey, we’re at the top here. There, you’d always be one of the poorer kids. I won’t be able to compete with the families who have fathers” (115). When they move, they are cut free of the system of marriage and domesticity that had confined them but they are also cast adrift without male financial support. Adele knows that others can see that she and Ann are different, and Adele fears their pity. As women on their own in the “wrong” kind of domestic space—cheap motels, cars, run-down apartments—Ann and Adele are excluded from the systems of power and upward mobility that they see working all around them in Los Angeles. Unable to control how others see her body, and her self, Adele indulges in frantic bouts of housecleaning in an attempt to control her space.

Regular housekeeping, such as daily cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking, and making beds is something that Adele fervently resists. Other people do these things, and at one point, she is briefly employed doing these tasks for other people,⁹¹ but in her own home, Adele does not make housekeeping part of her routine. On the occasions when Adele does clean, she does so with the same excess that she brings to shopping, dressing, or chasing men. Early in the novel, when Ann and Adele live with Adele’s new husband

⁹¹ Adele briefly holds a job as a maid for one of her few acquaintances in Los Angeles. As part of her pay, she and Ann get to live in a small house behind the house Adele has been hired to clean. But Adele is inept at her job and prefers arranging flowers and admiring the clothing in her employer’s closet to actually cleaning the house. Adele is soon fired but she and Ann are allowed to stay in the backhouse and pay rent.

Ted in the unfurnished house on Carriage Court, Adele calls Ann in from playing one Saturday morning to make her clean the kitchen. Ann sees that her stepfather's car is gone from the driveway and realizes that "that was bad" (47). It is already afternoon but Adele is still in the sweatshirt that she sleeps in every night. It is never revealed what has happened to make Ted leave, but we assume that there has been a fight of some kind. Adele takes her fear and frustrations out on Ann by making her meticulously vacuum the kitchen floor: "'You go over EACH square FIVE times. THEN you move on to the next one.' The kitchen was the only room in the new house that didn't have wood floors. [...] 'See, now watch carefully.' My mother put all her weight into banging the long brush against the molding. Her legs moved with bitter, zealous energy" (48). Clearly, this exchange is about power. When Adele feels her control over her relationships, and thus over her livelihood, slipping, she focuses her energy on the one thing that is within her power to master. Adele manipulates Ann into cleaning and accuses her of taking advantage of her, of "playing" all week while she works. This is what Greiner alludes to when he suggests that women perpetuate their subservience by maintaining the rituals and power relations of housekeeping by expecting each other to participate in them.

Adele's compulsive cleaning could easily be seen primarily as a means to keep Ann bonded to her. When Adele succumbs to a manic episode of cleaning, she forces Ann to clean too; while physically engaged in the activities of cleaning, Ann cannot fulfill her own desires.⁹² But I would also argue that Adele's frantic need to put the

⁹² Adele often turns to cleaning when Ann is moving away from her in some manner, by playing with her friends, or going to a Christmas party, for example. Adele ruins these opportunities by trapping Ann with her while she cleans.

house to rights reflects her fundamental struggle to distance her body from filth. In her influential study on dirt, cleanliness, and taboo, Mary Douglas argues that the act of cleaning, and of tidying a space, is a generative act rather than an act of removal: “Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (2). When Adele tries manically to clean her space, to remove the filth that surrounds her, and distance herself from the trash that has accumulated in her space she is actually attempting to re-order her environment and herself within it, to reframe “matter out of place” (40). As Douglas notes, “When we honestly reflect on our busy scribbling and cleanings [...] we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house” (85). Therefore, Adele is attempting to establish boundaries between herself and the dirt around her, and, in so doing, make her efforts to create a home space visible. But no matter how thoroughly she cleans her domestic space, her efforts fail to effect change on anything other than the literal spaces that surround her. She may have created a boundary, but she is not able to build a home upon it. When her space is clean, she is still unable to change the fact that she views *herself* as dirty and trashy and, as Ann notes, “always worried that people would think [they] were unclean” (245).⁹³ Adele’s inability to create the kind of home that she believes will secure her a comfortable, middle-class life—even if she is unsure about her desires for such a life—abjects her as clearly as Sylvie’s wandering and odd

⁹³ Deborah Denenholz Morse considers this moment in the text as reflective of a deep-seated concern with shame in the novel: “The use of the biblical word ‘unclean’ connotes that Adele’s fear is much deeper, that she feels that the world might discover that they are different pariahs. Ann seems to be discussing a more primal guilt when she reflects that ‘our work was simple, but it hung over us so constantly that we lost track of what exactly it was we hadn’t done’” (70).

housekeeping abject Sylvie. Moreover, like the homeless women who become an extension of the abject by carrying debris and trash on their bodies, Adele paradoxically engages the abject when she cleans: during her moments of manic cleaning, Adele neglects to clean her body. She comes into extended physical contact with the dirt and grime of her space and allows herself to become covered and contaminated by the filth that she is trying to eradicate. Wearing the same dirty sweatshirt to sleep in, to clean, and then back to bed, she is never able to distance herself from her internalized feelings of trashiness. She is an embodiment of the dirt around her and no amount of scrubbing will get her clean.

Adele's greatest desire is to establish the kind of life that can be looked at without shame. Having lived an unconventional life, and moving outside the boundaries of traditional domesticity, Adele is what Douglas would call a "marginal being" (97). Her behavior is viewed more harshly because of her contact with the road and with poverty. Adele lives outside the system of acceptable female behavior and as such is unlikely to find entrance back into a class system of which she believes she ought to be a part. Nonetheless, Adele attempts to erase all visible signs of her difference by establishing an irreproachable physical appearance. Except for her moments of manic housekeeping, during which she seems indifferent to the soiling of her body, Adele is fastidious about her personal cleanliness and appearance. Adele's appearance, and Ann's as an extension of her own, are critical to her entrance into a life free of judgment; she believes that by giving the impression of class in her physical appearance she will gain access to equally immaculate domesticity via marriage and money. But maintaining an

outward appearance of worth and class is a constant battle. Throughout the text, friends, neighbors, boyfriends, and schoolmates monitor Ann and Adele. Upon arriving in California, Adele decides that they will spend their first night at the upscale Bel-Air Hotel. But they have been driving for days and their clothes are rumpled, and their hair is flat. Understanding the importance of blending in with the other patrons of the hotel, Adele pulls Ann into a restaurant bathroom and puts all her efforts into making them presentable:

In the rest room my mother plugged her steam rollers into the wall socket and unpacked her cosmetics and soaps, lining them up on the counter. She used the rows of sinks as if this was her own huge dressing room. She turned on a hand dryer and touched up her nails, holding them under the warm air.

She washed, shaved her underarms and ripped open a fresh package of nylons. She clipped the hot rollers into her hair. She stood in pantyhose and a bra, starting on her makeup. She didn't dally, watching other people. Strangers touched their hands under thin streams of water in the sink farthest from us and my mother didn't notice. She was driven.

The will to be clean. (27)

Adele and Ann's temporary transience has pushed them into behavior that would otherwise seem unacceptable to them. Later in the novel, Adele is unwilling to go into the ice-cream shop without full hair and makeup, but here, in an anonymous restroom along the highway, she seems unaware that she is being watched. However, Ann does

notice and sees how “Other women disciplined their eyes to look away from [them], cut a hole in the air and avoided falling in again” (27). Ann’s shame is akin to that of the women who see her. Adele has violated strict conventions both by drawing attention to her own dirt, and by allowing her body—her dirty body—to be seen in public. The women who view this scene are contaminated by their viewing of bodily exposure and by Adele’s appropriation of a common space as her own. Adele’s “will to be clean” allows her to ignore the discomfort of everyone around her. She is unfazed by their distress because her desire for purity is stronger than her shame at being temporarily exposed.

This not-quite-public, not-quite-private bathroom is a liminal space, one in which societal rules are more fluid. While it is clear that Ann, and the women who view Ann and Adele in the bathroom, understand this space to be fixed and bound by clear conventions, Adele views the bathroom in a different way. It is, quite literally, a stopover on their way to their true destination. They have spent long days of movement and will soon look for a stopping place in California. The restroom, then, is in-between in a physical sense, and because it is where they slough off the grime of the road and prepare their bodies for a new kind of life. This scene clearly reflects the novel’s concerns with combining the public and the private, home and away. It dissolves the boundaries between self and other while also acknowledging the difficulty of being a woman on the road. The road in this story represents the possibility of mobility, both in terms of financial independence for women and the ability to make choices based on individual desires rather than the demands of a patriarchal system that ties them to the

home. This scene encapsulates the novel's concerns that women are always reviled when they move out of their assigned space and make a spectacle of their bodies. It also signals the possibility of public spaces that make room for the private.

Adele's willingness to shake off the rules of societal engagement by exposing herself and her daughter to other women's gazes and to the dirt of the public restroom is a radical act that subverts the notion that displaced women are powerless while also questioning the truism that subversion is, on its own, powerful. Just as Adele attempts to clean her domestic space by reigning in "matter out of place," in this scene she ventures to remove all signs on her body, and Ann's, that *they* are out of place. In a problematic moment that highlights Adele's dependence on the social order that keeps her subjugated, Adele believes that she and Ann embody the dirt that they try to eradicate in their homes. Adele affects the women around her in this scene by claiming the public space as her own and declaring her right to use it. The impact that she has on Ann however, inadvertently reasserts the boundaries of propriety that Adele is overstepping. This is just one more way that Simpson offers up the potential for a radical revisioning of women, mobility, and domestic space only to immediately thrust the reader into the danger and discomfort of the reality of such a vision.

In both *Houskeeping* and *Anywhere but Here*, the image of the home is tied, in complicated ways, to questions of proper domesticity, gender, movement and freedom, and constructions of space, both within the home and outside of it. As a pair, these texts work to subvert comfortable notions of women at home in the domestic sphere. They also, and more radically, upset counter-narratives that would suggest that women need

only to take their lives into their own hands, cast off the fetters of domesticity, and hit the open road, to find subversive freedom. The end of *Housekeeping* suggests that Ruth does not fully embrace a life of movement, and longs for a more conventional home-space. When Ruth “chooses” mobility, she moves away from a space of ironic vulnerability—her home—and into a space of anonymity. In aligning herself with Sylvie, Ruth slowly relinquishes her hold on individuality and becomes increasingly comfortable living in Sylvie’s shadow. This culminates in Ruth and Sylvie’s exit from the town. As they cross the bridge, they disappear from the town, and are presumed by many to be dead (some critics of the novel even believe this to be the case, seeming to ignore the final chapter in which Ruth talks about her transient life). In her new life, Ruth is a “drifter.” She moves about with Sylvie and sometimes takes a waitress job, but they never stay long, leaving when coworkers and patrons begin to suspect that she is “unlike other people” (214). Ruth is different because she is not a mere transient but is one unhoused. She imagines her birth as a trauma, like everyone’s, after which “they seal the door against our returning” (215). Perhaps her longing for shelter stems from this initial casting-out. Regardless, her desires are explicitly tied to her regret over losing contact with her sister, the only other person who understands her abandonment. She imagines passing by the old house and fancies that Lucille lives there, keeping the place “fiercely neat, stagnating the forces of ruin” (216). She longs for her sister and knows that they are incomplete without one another, as incapable of connection as Lucille is of completing the ring of water left on a tablecloth in the novel’s final scene.

Contrary to Ruth's desperate yearning for a protective home space that will arrest her emotional drifting and restore a sense of security, Ann runs as far and as quickly from her mother as she can. In response to her mother's unconventional homemaking, Ann is unwilling to establish any kind of home space. After leaving California to attend college on the East Coast, she routinely visits her relatives in Wisconsin, but does not return to her mother for five years. Like Ruth, Ann occupies marginal spaces in her years away from her mother, traveling, attending college, and visiting darkened movie theaters full of "audiences raucous from displacement" everyone "away from home" (475). When she finally does visit her mother, Adele offers her a gift of the Lincoln which she has saved for Ann. But Ann refuses the car, preferring to go back to the East Coast by plane. Once a symbol of safety and manageable space, the car now reminds Ann only of her years of dislocation.

My suggestion that Ruth and Ann are vulnerable and unmoored by their transient lives, and that they suffer from a longing for a stability that they will never find, is not meant to indicate that Sylvie and Adele are immune to such difficulties. On the contrary, Sylvie and Adele are subject to the trials of female mobility and are impacted, even more than Ruth and Ann, by the codes of their hometowns. They suffer the consequences of stepping out of line and attempting to establish a more fluid space for themselves that allows for connection and freedom, safety and movement. As transients, Sylvie and Adele prove their willingness to move beyond restrictive rules, even when doing so might threaten their safety and subjecthood. Their attempts to blend movement and "proper" mothering and housekeeping open them up to the scrutiny of outside

observers—neighbors as well as strangers. But just by refusing the logic of “home or the road” Sylvie and Adele suggest that there might be room for both. The characters I focus on in the following chapter also grapple with binary understandings of home, but they do so without the luxury of mobility. Instead, the white trash figures in these texts search for ways to understand their homes outside of a damaging class system that marks them as unfit and always outside then norm.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORKING-CLASS HOME: POVERTY, TRASH, AND THE HOME

DREAM IN *THE BEANS OF EGYPT*, *MAINE*, *BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA*, AND *WINTER'S BONE*

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.

— Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*

White trash importantly objectifies, in a way no other word does, both the stigmatized condition of whites in poverty and the emotionally charged, fearful image that they present to working- and middle-class whites. White trash locates ‘those people’ both in their homes and in the cultural imaginary of more ‘respectable’ whites.

— John Hartigan, Jr., “Name Calling: Objectifying ‘Poor Whites’ and ‘White Trash’ in Detroit”

Working-class women have not found a home in middle-class America. Not really. Recalling the struggle against the dirt and filth of poverty, they try to make of their small and modest homes, safe, clean places. The curtains are changed; the glass doors polished with vinegar; the front stoop swept. They tend the walls of self-definition. They are encouraged to experience the good life vicariously through soap operas, supermarket tabloids, and TV sitcoms. In truth, they are never queen, not even for a day. So, then, a tidy house, a good neighborhood, clear boundaries are appealingly safe homes. These homes can also be suffocating, and silencing, enclosures. Enclosures which can blow over with the slightest shift in economic winds.

— Janet Zandy, *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings, An Anthology*

In *Housekeeping* and *Anywhere but Here*, the primary response to the oppressive power of domesticity is to reject it in favor of a more fluid, moveable understanding of home, one that is empowering and precarious, subversive, and potentially isolating. The

power of each text stems from its ability to maintain a productive tension between longing for home and longing for the freedom from subjugation that the protagonists hope to find on the road. And while such freedom often leads to lonely rooms, inadequate jobs, and shameful visibility, the very act of leaving home strikes at the heart of the myth of the middle-class home dream. This chapter expands on the concerns of the previous one by examining texts more fully entrenched in the working class. Where the protagonists of *Housekeeping* and *Anywhere* were free to embrace or reject the standards of middle-class home stability, the characters in Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985),⁹⁴ Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), and Debra Granik's film *Winter's Bone* (2010)⁹⁵ are hemmed in by the knowledge that they will never achieve middle-class domesticity. Moreover, they rarely even acknowledge middle-class domesticity as something to which they might have access. These texts represent individuals who, rather than rejecting the traditional home ideal, have been rejected from it. In their dramatic departure from the home dream, these narratives of poverty and "trash" highlight the power of the middle-class dream of home in compelling ways, particularly in the ways that they portray the home space, family relations, domestic work, surveillance, and mobility.

Central to my readings of these homes is the fact that these texts, rather than considering the problem of home from within the home-dream paradigm, comment on

⁹⁴ There are two versions of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*: the "debut" edition published in 1985, and a revised, "finished" edition published in 1995. Chute published the "finished" edition in order to complete what she felt was "a bad book," but also as a response to what she views as critics' misinterpretations of her work. The differences between the two versions are slight, but the 1995 text includes a postscript in which Chute "explains" aspects of the novel she feels are misunderstood. All references in this chapter are to the 1985 text unless otherwise noted.

⁹⁵ The film is an adaptation of Daniel Woodrell's 2006 novel of the same name.

conceptions of home from positions of marginality. The figures in Allison, Chute, and Granik's texts are denied access to the home dream because of their poverty and because of their class status. While being working-class often implies financial insecurity, there are a number of distinctions between monetary wealth and class standing that are relevant to these texts. Significantly, both the Beans of Chute's novel (and the Letourneaus of her 1988 novel *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*) and the Boatwrights of *Bastard out of Carolina* are well-known in their communities not simply because they are poor—many people struggle financially—but because they are “trash.”

The term “trash” or more specifically “white trash” is a complicated one that is equally invested in concepts of race and class. The first recorded usage of the term, according to Matt Wray, can be found in a letter written by English actress Fanny Kemble about a visit to a wealthy home in Baltimore. Her letter recounts her hostess's “account of ‘the slaves of their estates,’” and indicates that, despite the slaves' “degraded” status, even they looked upon white servants with disdain and regarded them as ‘poor white trash’” (Wray 41).⁹⁶ The fact that blacks were the first to use the term indicates an attempt to assert a measure of power by placing some other group on the bottom. But, as Wray argues, the slaves' original invention of the term was quickly co-opted by “literate, middle-class and elite whites who invested its meaning with social power, granting it the powers of social stigma and prejudice” (43). The cultural shift that

⁹⁶ The original term “poor white trash” indicates a primary alignment with poverty. While white trash is still typically understood to be impoverished, this is no longer always the case. Figures such as Elvis and Bill Clinton—personalities that are considered by many to be white trash, not because of poverty, but because of their heredity, cultural roots, and perceived behavior—make this clear. See Gael Sweeney's essay “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis and the Aesthetics of Excess” for a fascinating study of these white trash figures.

saw middle-class whites using the term to maintain the boundaries of proper whiteness is so significant, in fact, that anthropologist John Hartigan Jr., in his study of white trash, *Odd Tribes*, glosses over the term's origination in slave culture. He focuses, rather, on the term's entrance into mass cultural consciousness, in the North as well as the South, in the period between 1840 and 1920. This era saw a huge influx of European immigrants who challenged preconceived understandings of what it meant to be white, and who unsettled the idea of whiteness as a natural, unmarked category.⁹⁷ As Matthew Jacobson argues "races are invented categories—designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating peoples along lines of presumed difference—Caucasians are made and not born" (4).⁹⁸ Therefore, this era's use of the term white trash indicates an attempt on the part of middle and upper-class whites to maintain their normative status by demeaning, and thus distancing themselves from, those whites who failed to live up to the standards of whiteness. For upper-class whites, Wray suggests, "*Poor white trash* must have seemed [...] an apt term for those whites who did not rise or live up to their ideals of industry, laboring not at all, or only in the most degrading jobs, toiling beneath or alongside the slaves" (43).

In conjunction with the influx of immigrants, the end of the Civil War and the subsequent reorganization of race and class categories, white trash became a way to solidify the definition of whiteness in an era that saw whiteness on shaky ground. As

⁹⁷ Hartigan examines the various ways that the term's use ranged "from the contemptible to the sympathetic, reflecting uncertainty both about the propriety of the term and the moral and social characteristics of the group to which it was applied" (62). In ways similar to the definition of the tramp, the term white trash was used both to seek aid for a marginalized group and to rally support for the further stigmatization and eradication of the group.

⁹⁸ Also see Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al. for further discussion of whiteness as a socially constructed category in need of continued theoretical unpacking.

Hartigan notes, “Whiteness both names and critiques hegemonic beliefs and practices that designate white people as ‘normal’ and racially ‘unmarked.’ White trash, a lurid stereotype and debasing racial epithet, applies to poor whites whose subordination by class is extreme” (*Odd Tribes* 1). In order to maintain the boundaries and racial superiority of whiteness, white trash needed to be removed from the central category of whiteness. Beginning in the 1830s, and continuing through the early twentieth century, white trash was the subject of debates about class and race that sought to discover why so many whites were unable to live up to their perceived birth-right. As Wray notes, Northerners used white trash as evidence of the moral depravity of slave-holding states, arguing that ending slavery would allow poor whites to do the jobs currently taken by slaves and “rise to their rightful place as respectable white citizens and industrious workers” (Wray 137).⁹⁹ Southern “proslavery apologists” argued that white trash was the result of “‘natural inferiority’ the inherited depravity that comes from generations of ‘defective blood’” and pointed to the northern, non-slave states, who had their own white trash, as proof (Wray 137). These opposing arguments led to the Eugenics movement, which sought to explain white trash as a hereditary condition, resulting from “incest and from racial and class miscegenation,” and an opposing medical approach which argued that maternal malnutrition and hookworm were to blame for the perceived “imbecility” of white trash (Wray 137).¹⁰⁰ Despite the seeming differences in attitude toward white

⁹⁹ This argument is remarkably similar to current anti-immigration rhetoric that claims that immigrants, legal and illegal, take jobs away from “hard working Americans” because immigrants are willing to work for lower wages.

¹⁰⁰ Eugenics studies, known as “Family Studies,” were popular and wide-ranging during this period. Nicole Rafter, in her collection of seven such studies, notes that what drove many Eugenicists was not a pseudo-Darwinian interest in the survival of the fittest, but rather the “survival of the unfit” (5). In other

trash, both groups took as their central premise that white trash could be explained as a failure to live up to the potentials of whiteness: one because they interbred, the other because parasites and disease were robbing them of their natural physical and mental capabilities (Wray 138).¹⁰¹

Although terms used to define lower-class whites shifted from “lubber” to “cracker” to “redneck,” and referred to subtly different categories of whiteness, some of which have been embraced by those to whom they refer, the term white trash remains a derogatory term.¹⁰² As Gael Sweeney argues, white trash has been used to encompass a class of whites deemed at once faulty and excessive. Sweeney contends that white trash, particularly the white trash body, “aggressively calls attention to itself: the excessive body refuses to be ignored. The White Trash body is, by definition, an excessive body” (255). Yet this body out of bounds, that so thoroughly shows its own excess (understood by Sweeney to be an aesthetic excess), is also a body that fails to perform. Especially in the South, white trash people are, as Sweeney states, “defined by their proximity in society and the Southern imagination to Blacks” (252). They are “labeled lazy, shiftless, no-account, diseased, ignorant, and degenerate, indeed, ‘worse than’ the Poor Blacks whose conditions (and insults) they share, [and] they are seen as degrading to dominant White culture because they reveal the lie of racism: that the so-called inferiority of the

words, Eugenicists recognized that large groups of “faulty,” “unfit” people were successfully reproducing children who would, they believed, live lives of crime, alcoholism, and violence.

¹⁰¹ As Wray notes, the hookworm crusaders succeeded in bringing white trash out of their stigmatized zone and creating the possibility of a white working class (Wray 138).

¹⁰² Wray plots the history of the terms “lubber,” “cracker,” and “white trash” and argues that each term functioned to further marginalize poor whites. Where lubber initially referred to poor whites in a relatively benign way, cracker “added new elements of violence, cruelty, treachery, and criminality” (Wray 136). White trash further denigrated poor whites by tying them and their marginalized status to blackness.

Blacks is embedded racially” (Sweeney 252). In thinking about white trash as aligned with blackness, particularly since black slaves were the first to use the term, it is tempting to imagine that it would only be an applicable designator in areas inhabited by both blacks and whites. Yet, as Sweeney’s catalog of white trash regions—“New Jersey Barrens, the mountains of West Virginia and Arkansas, the swamps of Louisiana and Florida, and the backwoods of Maine and Georgia”—makes clear, white trash is about more than race or region (252). White trash is defined aesthetically as “the flashy, the inappropriate, the garish,” and according to behavior, as when white trash act “in a manner considered indecorous” rather than simply “acting black” (Sweeney 249, Hartigan, “Name Calling” 46). White trash is tied, in these ways and others,¹⁰³ to an existence eked out beyond the borders of the acceptable.

The political and social implications of aligning “white trash” with aberrance are wide ranging. One of the most powerful repercussions of such a marginalizing label is found in the way that white trash are denied access to the American Dream and, more specifically, to the dream of home. It is therefore quite significant that the Beans, Boatwrights, and Dollys of *Winter’s Bone* are all “white trash.”¹⁰⁴ In an attempt to parse the meaning of white trash, Wray considers the implications of joining “white” and “trash” in one term:

¹⁰³ White trash has many additional linguistic implications, some of which I will examine in this chapter, that tie it to marginal spaces, to waste, and to categorical judgments that define trash as opposed to quality, as when we refer to trash TV or trashy novels.

¹⁰⁴ This term is used to varying degrees in these texts. It is, to my mind, an applicable category because of the way critics refer to the figures in the texts and because of the way that the characters so clearly conform to commonly held views of white trash.

But why *white trash*? Split the phrase in two and read the meanings against each other: *white* and *trash*. Slowly, the term reveals itself as an expression of fundamental tensions and deep structural antinomies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt. In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, *white trash* names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other. It brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order. (2)

Wray's contention that "white trash" is an unsettling category because of the many ways that it combines seemingly disparate class and racial categories speaks to my understanding of the function of categories of class and domesticity in these texts. The Beans, Boatwrights, and Dollys are feared and despised not only because they are trashy, but because they are white and trashy. In *Beans*, Earlene's father, Lee, inaccurately defines himself as middle-class in an effort to distance himself from the Beans who live across the street from him. Even though his financial situation is just as precarious, he looks across at the Beans' house and sees a mobile home "like a turquoise-blue submarine," with doors that open "like a can of tuna fish" (5, 8). Such disdain is necessary in order for Lee to maintain the sense that he is a part of the American Dream, a dream that prompted him to build his house "from blueprints" and take pride in its upkeep. Just as the affluent residents of Linden Hills actively work to keep the residents

of Putney Wayne far from their front doors and thus in their own identity category, Lee and others disparage the Beans and the Boatwrights so as not to be considered like them. Moreover, the liminality of which Wray speaks in the above quote points to the reality of white trash domesticity as a state in which the boundary work of white trash is made literal.¹⁰⁵ In white-trash domesticity, figures are pushed to the edges, margins, and stigmatized boundaries from which middle-class, dominant whites establish their centrality.

Fundamental to white-trash identity is an understanding that they do not fit, that they are shameful, and that they are especially deficient because their whiteness should have given them access to the comfort and security of the middle class. Considerations of home space, as the ultimate expression of a place to belong, are a natural extension of this. Michelle Tokarczyk, in *Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison*, argues that

For working-class women writers, home is a packed concept evoking a physical space of warmth, safety, and relative material comfort. Home connotes a sense of belonging, a sense of recognizing and, to some extent, embracing origins. Home is also, most importantly, a contested site:

Home can be the place that comforts *and* the place that traps. (26)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Wray's *Not Quite White* utilizes boundary theory as a way of "gaining an understanding of how people attempt to classify and organize themselves and others into distinct groups—and how those same groups are ranked and ordered into scales of relative human worth and achievement" (8).

¹⁰⁶ As do a number of critics who examine the texts in this chapter, Tokarczyk uses the terms "poverty class" or working poor rather than white trash (17).

This chapter expands on these ideas but takes issue with Tokarczyk's claim that home is necessarily "a space of warmth, safety," and "material comfort." This seems an idealistic view that focuses on the dream of home rather than the reality of it. I argue that homes are far more complicated spaces than this, often becoming cold and dangerous, not just because they "trap," as Tokarczyk suggests, but because they do not live up to the expectations that they ought to be comfortable and safe.

The characters in these texts are marked as trash in a number of ways: family legends involving alcohol, violence, and womanizing surround the men of each family, women tend to have many children, often outside of marriage and by different men, the men have trouble finding and keeping jobs, they spend time in prison, and they die young. The Beans, Boatwrights, and Dollys fully conform to readers' expectations of trashiness in many ways. What makes these texts subversive are the ways that Chute, Allison, and Granik muddle and reclaim the term trash by complicating the stereotype, making the characters not just members of the Bean, Dolly, or Boatwright clans, but *individuals* capable of love, fear, and heartache, rather than just violence, alcoholism, and sex.¹⁰⁷ Despite this individuality, however, the fact that the families in the novels

¹⁰⁷ Allison and Chute have both spoken and written about the term "trash." Chute is known to detest the term (Cynthia Ward 87), but is proud to call herself a "redneck," and a member of the "tribal class" (Chute, "Interview" n.p.). Allison, on the other hand, recognizes that she comes from a group of people known as "the lower orders, the great unwashed, the working class, the poor, proletariat, trash, lowlife and scum," but that she "can make a story out of it, out of us" (Allison, *Two* 1). Therefore, as Jillian Sandell notes, "Allison reclaims [...] the label 'white trash' as a political strategy to expose class-based discrimination in the United States and to emphasize the structural, rather than volitional, nature of economic oppression" (215). Complicating Allison's attempts to reclaim white trash slurs is the fact that both Allison and Chute, and their writings, are frequently described as "authentic" in part because the authors lived the lives that their characters do. Jennifer Campbell discusses this problematic focus on the "fascinating and horrifying" aspects of Chute's life and notes that "each of the blurbs on the back of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* praises the novel by calling attention to some level of naturalism in Chute's life and work" (121).

view themselves, and are viewed by others, as “clans” makes it difficult to discern exactly how we, as readers, are meant to view them. To be a Boatwright, Bean, or Dolly is to have access to the power as well as the shame that such membership entails. The families are proud of many aspects of their reputations within the community, and although they feel the humiliation of being called trash, they embrace the notion that they are strong, willful, and resourceful. The Boatwrights, and particularly the men, “think that a working man just naturally turns up in jail now and then, just like they believe they got a right to stay drunk from sunset on Friday to dawn on Monday morning” (127). The Bean children take it as a matter of course when their Uncle Ruben shows up “stabbed again,” and Ree, in *Winter’s Bone* brags to the bail bondsman who is after her father, Jessup, that she is able to find Jessup when the bondsman cannot simply because she is “A Dolly, bread and buttered.” While Allison’s main character, Bone, despises being called trash and is shamed by it, her Aunt Raylene laughs while stating that “Trash rises” as long as it is left alone so that no one can “mess with it” (180). A primary concern in each of these texts is the way that the idea of white trash becomes an internalized and immobilizing state. As Hartigan notes, “The attacks [of white trash] come from within a body labeled trash in the forms of self-doubt and self-contempt, as much as from the neighbors” (129). It is significant, then, that all of these texts privilege the voice or point of view of someone who is uncomfortable with being called trash or with being aligned with trash. The difficulty for these figures extends beyond establishing a self in a society that deems you unworthy, odd, and flawed. For the protagonists in these texts, it is not enough to find a place within the “clan.” Rather, they

long for escape from domestic scenarios that assert their shamefulness and mark their inhabitants as trash. For example, Ree proclaims her desire for something more than her poverty allows her when she tries to join the army. Even as she draws on the power of Dolly membership, Ree reveals her difference; she wants more for herself than the life of survival and drugs that her family offers her.

Throughout each of these texts, individuals are marked and singled out as trash because of the way that they act, the things that they value, and the material things that they have, lack, or long for. The most powerful markers of trash, however, can be found in and around the home. As the previous chapters of this dissertation indicate, homes in America are strong indicators of class status and signal their class most clearly through their outward appearances. Upkeep of the house and the yard signify as much to neighbors as does an interior that they might never see. According to middle-class standards that view the front lawn as a signal to neighbors of a family's prosperity and taste, the houses in *Beans*, *Bastard*, and *Winter's Bone* are visibly flawed. Rather than lawns, the families in these texts have "yards" beaten into hard-packed dirt by the sun and too many children's feet. Front yards are not "kept" for show, but for storage and as workspaces in which to do laundry. Further, back yards hold vegetable gardens, or woods, and are thus spaces of labor—gardening and hunting—rather than leisure as they would be in a middle-class home. While yard work could be considered its own kind of labor, and certainly many middle-class men and women consider it work rather than play, the distinction here is that yards become extensions of interior female work-spaces

in these texts. Tending to a flower garden, or watering the lawn, requires expendable income and free time—things that working-class women have less of.¹⁰⁸

More significant even than the lack of aesthetic space surrounding the homes in these texts is the fact that the yards and houses indicate a fundamental disruption of inside/outside distinctions. The first function of a house is to keep its occupants safe and sheltered from the dangers outside its doors, but the houses in these texts seem unable to provide this function. When Roberta Bean keeps “her old pickup [...] parked close to the door” of her blue house, or when Beal Bean brings the sand and dirt of his logging job into the bed sheets, the things of outside infiltrate the space of the home. Allowing the house to get or stay rundown, not having the money for electricity, or running water, and failing to keep things clean all indicate a breaching of boundaries between the purity/cleanliness and safety of the home, and the dangers/dirt of things outside the home. As the epigraph by Douglas at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this “matter out of place” fundamentally disrupts our sense of order. According to Douglas, this disruption need not be a true defilement of something pure. Matter out of place can be as simple as “bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; [...] upstairs things downstairs” (45). The common response to such disorder—the need to order it—“is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (45). When individuals fail to maintain boundaries,

¹⁰⁸ Consideration of the use-value as well as the labor demands of working-class yards is intriguing in the way that it upturns typical understandings of the trashy front yard as a signal of the shiftlessness of the house’s inhabitants. Janisse Ray, in her memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, describes the junkyard that surrounded her house and provided her family’s livelihood as “dangerous, strewn with broken glass and shards of rusty metal,” but also a place of value, in which other people’s trash could be salvaged, “fixed,” and remade into something useful (9).

or “cherished classifications,” and when such failures are visible, the people who live in the failed houses are labeled as trash and thus become walking emblems of their home failure. Their houses are trashy, and thus they are trash. Therefore, while the home is supposed to be a shelter for keeping dirt, danger, and elements out, when the very residents become trash, they become part of the contamination of the house. They are thus able to contaminate others simply by being near them.

While I have already considered the term “trash” as it applies to whiteness and to class, the term has further implications when considering trash as a material thing. Local governments have a vested interest in trash management, since literal trash, that which has been used and discarded, is associated with filth and decay. Whether or not a particular item of trash is actually *used up* is often a matter of opinion; one person’s trash might be seen by someone else to have significant use value. But regardless of the potential discrepancies between something that is actually useless—trash—and something that has been unnecessarily thrown away, the middle-class establishes its superiority, in part, by relying on a definition of trash that requires that anything that appears out of bounds be properly placed. In the case of trash, this usually means removing the trash from places of human use and inhabitation. Trash is placed in a trashcan, and, eventually, on the curb where it is picked up by garbage collectors and removed to a landfill or dump outside of town. In all ways, trash is something that individuals and government work to keep safely away from home spaces and established neighborhoods. Therefore, when poor people choose to, or are forced to, live outside of these established neighborhoods they move geographically closer to the space of

society's trash. Throughout *Bastard*, *Beans*, and *Winter's Bone*, white trash spaces occupy the margins of acceptable society. In *Beans* and *Winter's Bone* especially, white trash domesticity often exists in a literal outside space, such as the Dollys' mountain dwellings. But even when white trash spaces are found within the city limits, or in direct view of middle-class spaces, as is the case with the Beans who live across from Earlene, white trash people remain literally and figuratively cordoned off from the rest of society. In these texts, as in society at large, undesirable areas and neighborhoods, both within and outside of established towns and cities, are recognizable and become the object of scorn and even gentrification efforts. The "wrong side of the tracks" or "the hood" are identifiers that function in a town's imaginary figuration of itself and its inhabitants. They are also often very real, very marginalizing descriptions of class-based (and often race-based) segmentations of domestic space.

When the dominant members of a society label specific spaces, or even individual houses, as white trash, the residents of such spaces spend most of their lives out of the view of the middle-class. Whether or not the spaces are on the margins of town or sectioned off within it, the middle-class does its best to avoid those areas, affecting a kind of disappearance of white trash. In many ways, it is necessary for the maintenance of class divisions that the homes and people in these invisible spaces remain unseen, particularly if the people in question are white. A recognizable example of this kind of geographic marginalization is the trailer park. Trailer parks tend to be set

back from the road and surrounded by trees or built on the outskirts of town,¹⁰⁹ because visual proof of the existence of poor whites within the midst of middle-class comfort would be disconcerting to those in the middle-class. Chute's *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*, which is set, like *Beans*, in Egypt, Maine, illustrates a similar space. Big Lucien Letourneau owns a piece of land and allows impoverished families to set up trailers and "shacks" on the land free of charge. This is extremely upsetting to the middle-class residents and selectmen of the town. They "winkle their noses" at the idea of Letourneau's "trailers between trailers" and the way that "he always finds a way to squeeze in one more," but what really offends them is the fact that "there are places where you can see that mess from the road" (63). They believe it to be "a disgrace" and worry that "people will think Egypt is the *slums!*" (63). Since these poor whites are considered trash—expendable, disposable, unpleasant to think about or look at—it is a disruption to the middle-class sense of order and propriety to allow them to be visible.

¹⁰⁹ Allan Bérubé offers a fascinating insight into growing up in a mid-century North-Eastern trailer park that he says was "on the edge of everything" (17). The lots were made of old barges, filled with landfill, and paved over with asphalt. Bérubé considers the material realities of "trailers parked on lots built over rotten barges," as "life on the geographic edge" (17). He further recognizes that "it was life on a social edge, too—a borderland where respectable and 'trashy' got confused" (17).

Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*

We can see a lot through our picture window. We can see every move the Beans make when they're outdoor. What they do inside is a mystery. Daddy says what the Beans do inside their mobile home would make a grown man cry.
— Carolyn Chute, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*

In *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, published in 1985 and then republished as the “finished version” in 1995, Carolyn Chute offers a stark and honest portrait of working-class America that is rarely seen in fiction or film.¹¹⁰ Figures of the working poor, and of “white trash” are not completely uncommon in popular culture but they are often presented either humorously as in the television shows *Roseanne*, or *My Name is Earl*, as heroic and noble figures such as seen in Great Depression narratives, or as irredeemably violent and criminal, as seen in films such as *Deliverance*.¹¹¹ In *Beans*, however, Chute refuses her characters any particular humor or nobility, choosing instead to portray the misery and complexity of poverty and to locate suffering within the home space. Since the division of labor is drawn strictly upon gender lines, the main occupants of the home space are women. The women spend most of their lives within the domestic

¹¹⁰ A.O. Scott argues that images of the working class are increasingly common in cinema and that Hollywood “seems to have found a class consciousness” in 2010. I believe he over-states his case, seeming to ignore a slew of films, such as *Requiem for a Dream* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2000), *Mystic River* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2003), *The Machinist* (dir. Brad Anderson, 2004), *Million Dollar Baby* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2004), *North Country* (dir. Niki Caro, 2005), and *Gone, Baby Gone* (dir. Ben Affleck, 2007), all produced in the past ten years. This claim of a resurgence of working-class films glosses over the very tricky task of defining the working-class as different from, or intersecting with, the white underclass, the poverty class, or the working poor. For my purposes here, I suggest an understanding of the working-class as largely a self-defining category. In other words, I will mainly focus on the ways in which the characters in the texts understand themselves and others to be members of certain classes.

¹¹¹ See Sandell for further discussion of the idea of the “good poor,” or the humor that so often infuses working-class texts. Sandell argues that “there are still certain stories that *cannot* be told—either because we have no language with which to articulate them or because there is no interpretive community to hear and understand them,” and that, for this reason, “some stories about class are easier to tell, [...] when couched in terms of humor, irony, or deceit” (212).

sphere—cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children and the garden—while the men go out to work at physically demanding and low-paying jobs. Women are kept in the house, on the porch, or in the yard by the demands of children and the kitchen, and by the overwhelming power of their poverty. The novel presents a portrait of white trash domesticity that imprisons women and exposes them to violence rather than providing shelter. Moreover, the material realities and work performed within this sphere are less valued than that of men's work in the wider world. I contend that an examination of the peculiarities of space and material goods in the novel reveal the potential for power and experimentation within the confines of the violent, working-class home.

The novel tells the story of the Bean family and of Earlene Pomerleau. The Beans are one of the most well known families in the area as much for their tendency to wind up in jail, in the hospital, and dead as for their sheer numbers. Almost everyone in the county is a Bean or related to them, but Earlene and her father, Lee Pomerleau, who live across the street from the Beans, define themselves by the fact that they abhor the Beans and are no relation. Earlene, six-years-old at the beginning of the novel, goes to school with Beal Bean and spends her at-home time variously patrolling the boundaries of her father's property, and sneaking across to the Bean yard. Earlene's young life is ruled by her father's desire for middle-class respectability, and her grandmother's fierce Christianity. Despite her father's best efforts, Earlene eventually runs away from home and, after a brutal sexual encounter that results in pregnancy, marries Beal Bean, the father of the child. Beal and Earlene live apart from one another for much of the child's young life and only establish their own household after Beal and Roberta (Beal's Aunt

and sometimes-lover) bodily remove Earlene from the bedroom to which she has gone to enact a slow suicide.¹¹² Beal, Earlene, and their daughter, Bonny Loo, share a house outside of town with Madeline Rowe, the wife of the incarcerated Ruben Bean and Earlene soon gives birth to a son. Moving to this house finalizes Earlene's shift from middle class aspirations to full-blown poverty, a condition that is solidified when Beal is gunned down by police while throwing rocks at a huge new house being built across the road from his "tarpaper shack."

The first lines of Chute's novel reveal its preoccupation with domesticity and with attempts to define the standards and desires of the middle-class home. Earlene Pomerleau, as a child, a young mother, and in her early thirties, narrates the novel; when the story is with the Beans, the narration shifts to a limited-omniscient point of view. Earlene's voice is privileged, however, and it is hers that opens and closes the text. Her first words are a description of the house she lives in with her father (her mother is away at a facility for the mentally ill) across the street from the Bean family:

We've got a ranch house. Daddy built it. Daddy says it's called RANCH 'cause it's like houses out West which cowboys sleep in. There's a picture window in all ranch houses and if you're in one of 'em out West, you can look out and see the cattle eatin' grass on the plains and the cowboys ridin' around with lassos and tall hats. But we ain't got nuthin' like that here in Egypt, Maine. All Daddy and I got to look out at is the

¹¹² After marrying Beal Bean, and giving birth to Bonny Loo, Earlene retires to a closed-off room that "smells of darkness and stale food and of skin that sleeps and sleeps, never washes" (142). Earlene refuses to eat, bathe, or open the shades and seems to be waiting for death to take her.

Beans. Daddy says the Beans are uncivilized animals. PREDATORS, he calls 'em. (3)

In these few lines, Chute conflates desires for home and desires for a middle-class identity by describing both Earlene's house and the "predatory" Beans against whom Earlene's father defines his life. Cynthia Ward notes that by combining conceptions of class and domesticity, "Earlene puts her finger on the architectural code informing the construction of her father's house and the social code informing the construction of her father's identity" (84). The "architectural code" that Ward refers to here is one defined by ideologies of freedom, Westward expansion, and rugged individualism, as well as by the aesthetic and more obviously conformist tendencies of the suburbs in the middle of the twentieth century. Ranch houses were invented specifically for the first manufactured suburbs, but their success stems from their psychic connection to the sense of space and openness indicated by the obligatory picture window. However, the expansive aesthetic indicated by the suburban picture window is upended here, since Lee and Earlene's picture window opens onto a sight of white trash depravity rather than a view of endless plains and cattle. While such a sight might suggest the dysfunction of the suburban promise in this text, it actually functions to reaffirm Lee's sense of superiority. As Ward notes, "the Beans are not disruptive of the view from Earlene's picture window but are essential" ("From Suwanee" 84). The Beans' tacky little house, on which blue lights blink all year, does not meet the standards of middle-class respectability to which Lee Pomerleau aspires, but its existence gives Lee something against which to define himself.

Lee is desperate to maintain the borders between his yard and the Beans', and thus between his upwardly-aspirational life, and their trashy one. To this end, Lee erects a sign that says "No Turning in Driveway!!!!" in a furious attempt to keep the Beans from using his property as an extension of their own. Lee's true goal is the assertion of his virtue since, as Mike Savage, Gaynor Bagnall, and Brian Longhurst argue, class has long been "tied up with understanding space and place. The 'classification' of population involved the moralization of space, with classes being zoned into specific locations and spatial boundaries acting as social markers" (95). Earlene acts as a soldier in this campaign, walking the edge of the yard and shouting across to the Beans to "KEEP OUT!" whenever she sees the Beans come near the driveway. The boundaries between the "big Beans" and the Pomerleaus are soon broken, however, when two men pull their car up to Earlene's yard and dump Ruben Bean, beaten and bleeding, onto Earlene's yard. Earlene's shoe and pure-white sock get splashed with Ruben's blood. The implication here is that Earlene has been soiled by her too-close contact with the Beans. When they infiltrate her space, she is no longer physically or morally safe and becomes inextricably bound to the Beans. Although they present the threat of moral degradation, the Beans' real position is more vulnerable than it is threatening, something that only becomes visible once the reader, along with Earlene, enters the Bean houses.

The Bean house across from the Pomerleaus is the first in a series of unconventional and often hugely flawed domestic spaces in the novel. In fact, unusual spaces extend beyond the aluminum front door and into the yard. One of the most interesting, and unconventional domestic spaces that will be introduced in the text is the

hole that the Bean children dig in their front yard and that young Earlene seeks shelter in when she is hiding from her father. At least one critic has noted that this space is a clear foreshadowing of the domestic entrapment and depravity that will be Earlene's fate,¹¹³ pointing to Earlene's vow to stay in the hole "forever." As Earlene slides down into the darkness of the hole, the description of the space and odd-sized objects recalls Alice's tumble down the rabbit hole and carries similar implications for Earlene's ability to navigate the Beans' world:

The corridor of the hole is curved. I slide down on my bottom, workin' my legs, the entrance behind me dwindling to a woolly little far-off cloud in the distance. I feel soda bottles along the way. A measuring cup. A rock drops from the ceiling and thwunks my shoulder. A spray of dirt lets go and fills my hair. I enter a big warm room. In apple crates are what feels like Barbie clothes and Barbie accessories. There's a full-sized easy chair. [...] I mutter, "Well ... I just ain't ever gonna leave THIS HOLE."
(16-17)

The hole signals Earlene's flight from one kind of oppressive home—her father's—to a darker, more sinister one¹¹⁴—Beal's—but there is also a powerful kind of creation going on in this scene. What is first important to consider is that Earlene has not made this

¹¹³ Ward, "From Suwanee" 85.

¹¹⁴There is an interesting connection between Earlene going down into the Bean's hole and Bone's statements in *Bastard out of Carolina* that "Growing up was like falling into a hole" (178). In addition to the figurative meanings of these examples—that these young girls recognize the difficulty of escaping the dark and limited life they will have as white trash women—there are also significant implications for the way domestic space is represented in these texts. Houses are dark, small, and cave-like and suggest the lack of security or warmth in white trash domestic spaces. Bone, for example, describes the houses that Daddy Glen rents as being "cold," and "icy," "no matter [they] had a better furnace" than her aunts did (80).

space but has instead come into it, uninvited. The Bean children have created, built, and excavated this space using meager tools and found objects to do so. Even the youngest of the Bean children participate in making this space and they do so with spoons—implements that tie this space and its creation to the larger female space of the kitchen that is so often undervalued.¹¹⁵ When three of the older Bean children find Earlene in their hole, they do not throw her out as we might expect them to but instead, offer her a piece of cake. The cake itself is indicative of the concurrent modes of viewing the Beans in this novel and of viewing white-trash domesticity generally. On the one hand, Earlene and the reader see the Beans as strange, tacky, and low-class, and this is conveyed through the specific material reality of the cake, which is blue, “the blue of a birdless airplaneless sunless cloudless leafless sky . . . warm steaming blue” (18). This is an odd color and a clear connection to the blue Christmas lights the Beans hang and keep up all year long. Moreover, the cake is “Betty Crocker,” a fact about which the Bean children are proud; their pride in the store-bought cake is a clear marker of their “white-trash” status.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the Beans accept Earlene into their world repeatedly throughout the novel and show themselves to be creative, nurturing, proud, and

¹¹⁵ Using spoons for digging also combines notions of cleanliness and dirt, as well as food with the soil from which it grows.

¹¹⁶ What I mean to indicate here is the difference between middle and working-class relationships with food and food production. One group values the skill and technique that goes into homemade, artisan baking and one values the financial ability to buy from a store. The Bean children respond to Earlene’s accusation that the cake is “Prob’ly POISON!” by assuring her that “It ain’t. It’s Betty Crocker” (18). The Beans see it as a point of pride that they have something store-bought and name-brand to offer. This pride in the ability to participate in consumer culture is reiterated later in the novel when Rosie brings Earlene a “store-bought cake” in a “fancy box” for her birthday. This cake, and the novelty of something beautiful and bought, makes Earlene and Bonny Loo “clap [their] hands” and shout “Yaaaaay!” (182). It is important to remember that buying from the store has a different association in the 1980s than it did in the 1950s and 1960s, as is clear from the example earlier in this dissertation of *Mad Men* and the Sara Lee cheesecake.

welcoming. The offer of cake is a truly altruistic gesture on the part of the Bean children and is indicative of this welcoming spirit. Also, the cake's blue-ness indicates a level of imagination and eagerness to experiment with traditional homemaking that is not apparent in Earlene's world. The cake scene is a brief one in the novel and one that pales in comparison to the more violent and degrading interactions that occur between Earlene and the Beans later on. Even so, it signifies the convergence of Earlene's fictional middle-class world (fictional because it is a class that she does not occupy literally but that she is taught to strive for) and the lower class, white-trash Bean family. It hints at the complex issues at work in the novel in its consideration of space and entrapment, of physical objects and their potential to nourish body and soul, and the limited sphere within which women will be allowed to work and create in the novel.

While Lee, and to a lesser extent, Earlene, understand middle-class domesticity as something to which respectable people aspire, and within which they currently attempt to dwell, the majority of home spaces in the novel provide only the most basic of human comforts and necessities, and sometimes fail at that. Beyond the visual affronts to Lee's sensibilities, the Bean homes, both the mobile home across from Lee and Earlene, and Roberta Bean's "wee blue house," present domestic configurations seemingly incongruous to typical understandings of "home." The many children and babies who circulate around the mobile home play in the house-trash and debris from cars and logging trucks that surround the dwelling. This kind of playground offends middle-class ideals about childhood, but it is also simply a dangerous space for the children. In the essay "Useful Stuff" Chute condemns the middle-class tendency to view a home as a

show-place rather than something with use-value, and argues that most middle-class Americans are afraid to have stuff in their yards because it “might REVEAL something about your character, about your private life” (4). By contrast, she argues, working-class people know what the “good stuff” is and keep it around because they do not have “the luxury of being WASTEFUL” (4). The implication here is that the “tires, radiators, and parts to old bicycles,” (46) that fill the Bean yard, even seemingly useless things such as a single clothespin or an Easter basket, are kept there for a potential future use. Lee Pomerleau, who wants to be middle-class, values aesthetic beauty—he spends his free time carving tiny wooden animals and installs a huge fish tank in the living room wall—and sees the Beans’ yard and blue Christmas lights as proof that they are “the tackiest people on earth” (47). In condemning this “junk” out of disdain for its tackiness, Lee asserts his superiority, but also misses the potential value of the Beans’ way of life. White trash spaces thus confound simple assessments in that Chute seems simultaneously to condemn a middle class that would build a house “like a three-ring circus” (214) or misinterpret Roberta’s “bag of bunnies” (91) housewarming gift as a cruel joke, while also portraying working class houses as inadequate and damaging.

When Lee reproaches the Beans for their white trash aesthetics and behavior, he is also attempting to defend the boundaries of his home and his way of life from the constant threat of white trash contamination. At Roberta’s house, Roberta puts her children to bed on the kitchen floor, or curled up in blankets on the splintery floors of the unfinished attic. Cold, dirty, and rot-filled spaces inundate the text and call attention to the illusory nature of middle-class comfort. The barn where Merry Merry keeps her

rabbit and where Granville Pollard sleeps and bathes, the dark and decaying room in which Earlene waits for death, the crawl-space under the Bean mobile-home that houses Beal's "miracle puppies," and even Bonny Loo's refrigerator full of dead animals all figure into a schema of domestic space that connects the comforts and protection of "home" with the realities of lives informed by struggle and death. The slippage between spaces of life and images of death points to the threat of contamination always at work in white trash homes and white trash figures. A particularly resonant example of this can be seen when Roberta jumpstarts her middle-class neighbor Mr. Goodspeed's car. Roberta takes charge of the situation, popping the hood while Mr. Goodspeed sits, unsure of himself, inside the car. When he realizes that she intends to do the job herself, he attempts to assert his authority by taking the jumper cables from her. But he is too late, and Roberta has finished the job. Before he can move away, he has thrust "his own arms through her long bare ones" (89). This brief moment of physical contact is enough to unnerve him and to set his heart pounding. But any romantic feelings that might be hinted at in this moment are negated in the next instance when he realizes he is near enough to Roberta to smell her:

Roberta Bean's smell is in his face, a smell he is convinced is the smell of the inside of her wee blue house. Because of this smell, he sees the long fingers worrying the rubber from a Mason jar of cloudy green beans, boiling them hard, doling out baggy white yeast rolls, everything of a hotness that is injurious to the lips and gums, while this brood with crew

cuts and long noses, like a bizarre litter of moles, tries even at the table to get close to her, forever close, madly close. (90)

Roberta's kitchen-smells speak to Mr. Goodspeed of her poverty, and, as an extension, her trashiness, her pitiable life, and the threat of her contamination.

The threat of contamination that Mr. Goodspeed feels when he vicariously enters Roberta's murky, dingy kitchen is also at work within the white trash houses themselves. When Beal visits Roberta in search of sanctuary and sex, he sees her bedroom, with its "bed of grayed crazy quilts" where "there's never any pillows," and he remembers passionate encounters there and thinks nothing of the unusual way that Roberta sleeps, rolling up "caterpillar-style in her quilts" (84, 85). Such a space indicates aberrant behavior, proven by the fact that Roberta is Beal's aunt and lover, and will be the site of discomfort and fear for Earlene. Earlene is the most frequent victim of contamination since she is the most likely to view the infiltration of outside things within her home as abnormal. In fact, it is in Roberta's attic, just upstairs from this strange room which is "always dark," that Earlene suffers her greatest contamination—impregnation by Beal—before rolling up in her own "scraped together" pile of quilts in eerie imitation of Roberta. Earlene confronts further contamination of her home space after she moves with Beal into the tarpaper shack outside of town. While living in this house, Beal works on and off as a truck driver for a logging company and frequently tracks the dirt of his work into the house with him. In addition to filling the bed sheets with sand from his work boots, Beal comes into the bedroom one evening in coveralls soiled with his own feces. He has walked a long distance home from work and sits on the edge of the bed,

unlacing his boots, “pullin’ the first one off real slow” until Earlene demands to know what the terrible smell is. Beal has no explanation except that his stomach “got him” on the way home. With no electricity or running water, the contamination of Earlene’s bedroom, begun when Beal sat on the bed, is compounded when Beal must use the bedroom as a washroom. Earlene tries to contain the pollution of her space by boiling a kettle of water and spreading towels on the floor for Beal to stand on as he “pass[es] the rag over his messy legs,” but the damage is already done. By bringing filth into the house, and into their shared bed, Beal irrevocably removes any semblance of purity or safety the house might still have held.

What is most significant about the spaces in *Beans*, and in *Bastard out of Carolina*, and *Winter’s Bone* as well, is the fact that the working class homes in the texts are vulnerable to outside surveillance and invasion. The discussion of the dangers of suburban surveillance in Chapter II focused primarily on internal surveillance; members of a neighborhood silently agree to a standard of conduct and appearance, and monitor one another. In working-class homes, the threat of surveillance and invasion tends to come from above and outside of their identity group. In some cases, this involves seemingly innocuous watching by people like Lee Pomerleau who either are middle-class, or would like to be. But working-class people, particularly if they are considered “trash,” are watched in equally dangerous ways by state agencies such as the police, child protective services, welfare, with the power to come into homes uninvited, and with the power to remove people from those homes. This is most clearly seen in *Beans* when Earlene’s husband, despite the utter lack of food in the house for himself, Earlene,

and their infant, refuses to apply for food stamps. When Earlene begs Beal to let her go to the nearest big town to sign up for assistance Beal protests because of his fear of being watched: “Beal makes a noise in his throat like he’s about to spit on the floor. ‘And do you know what would happen to us if they find out I’ve been workin’ under the table this long? Guh-uh-uh-government gets out the old fuh-uh-feelers . . . Once you get in the old welfare game, they got a trail on you ‘cause, lady . . . when you’re poor, you stink!’” (176). Beal’s fear of being surveilled is so strong that it outweighs his need to protect or care for his family, and he threatens to “beat the shit” out of Earlene if he sees “*one* government *official* hangin’ around” the house (177, emphasis original). Lee raised Earlene to believe that she was better than the Beans and their trashy ways, and because of this, she views state agencies as helpful rather than invasive and puts her trust in them in ways that Beal never can.

The difference between the way that Earlene and Beal perceive the state largely stems from their varied understandings of their place within the class order of Egypt, Maine. Where Earlene relies on state assistance in emergencies—she eventually calls an ambulance to help Beal when he becomes delirious with fever from an infected eye—Beal fears that the hospital will charge them money, and put them in their “computers” (179). When the ambulance finally comes to pick Beal up, Chute seems to validate Beal’s reluctance to seek help. When the ambulance appears, a “red light sweeps across [the] house” and a man “holds [a] flashlight on various corners of the porch” (181). The men are efficient but impersonal as they take in the fact of the family’s poverty, and pass quiet judgment as they peer about the porch and handle Beal’s gun. They tend to Beal,

but they do not speak to Earlene or her daughter, Bonny Loo. This scene reads as so incredibly invasive partially because of the fact that Earlene and Beal had previously tried to stay hidden. For working-class families, keeping out of sight and keeping quiet is both a survival tactic and a self-perpetuating subjugation. They hide from the state and from those of higher standing than themselves because of fear of being singled out. The fact that they hide away, however, marginalizes them further. The large and expensive house being built across the road from Beal and Earlene's house introduces the threat of exposure even before Earlene allows the state onto her porch. Earlene, Beal, and others in the novel variously admire, loathe, and fear the new house for the ways that it highlights their own inadequacy. Shortly after Beal's trip to the hospital, Earlene and Rosie, one of Beal's cousins, sit on the porch looking at the big house:

I look over and think what a crazy thing this new house is. Until now, there ain't been neighbors . . . and now we got 'em. I says, "It's a pretty place." [Rosie] whistles. "They got moocho, that's for sure." She rubs her fingers together. She says, "Earlene, what's them classy folks gonna think of *this*?" She leans back on the legs of the chair and picks at the tarpaper wall. (184)

It is not as though the big house makes Earlene aware of her situation, but rather that it makes it more difficult for her to normalize her situation. Moreover, by turning attention away from the power structure that would allow for a grand, new home to be built across the road from a tarpaper shack without heat or running water, Rosie inadvertently

centers blame on the people who have failed to create a home that would protect them not only from the elements, but also from shame.

In scenes such as this, it is clear that Chute is invested in exposing the realities of poverty and its related material difficulties. However, when reviewers expand on this reading to consider the ways that poverty establishes a system that perpetuates ignorance, violence, isolation, and the subjugation of women at the hands of men, and men at the hands of indifferent bosses, Chute balks. Chute rejects the idea that her characters are “trapped” in a situation they must escape by saying, ““Wow, no, that’s not it! I think of living alone in a New York apartment as being trapped. What traps these people is *low pay*—they can’t have enough houses so they can live down the road from each other in comfort”” (Chute, qtd. in Cynthia Ward 83). Chute’s impulse here seems to be to blame all the struggles of her working-class characters on financial inequalities. While it is certainly the case that many of the troubling aspects of the novel could be alleviated if the Beans had more expendable income, this would not do away with those difficulties that seem to stem from the family itself. Despite the constant threat of state intervention, the characters are most threatened from within their own homes. Marie Bean is beaten and abused by her husband Rubie, and Lee punishes a teenaged Earlene by forcing a bottle of shampoo between her teeth and squeezing the liquid down her throat. These invasions from within suggest that the houses are not safe spaces, even when they are safe from the state.

This is particularly true for women in these texts, since it is women who are most often beaten, or sexually violated, and who are tied to the home by children. The most

troubling contestations of home as safe space in *Beans* involve Earlene and Beal Bean. Two scenes in particular—Earlene and Beal’s first sexual encounter in Roberta’s attic, and Beal’s “rape” of Earlene on their front porch—have been widely discussed and debated. Many reviewers understand these moments to be portrayals of rape, but Chute herself contends that they are not, and that reviewers simply misread the scenes because they are outsiders trying to understand people different from them.¹¹⁷ Whether or not the sex act between Earlene and Beal is rape in a strict sense, the encounter is clearly an unpleasant one for Earlene, and, since Earlene gets pregnant from this episode, one that determines the kind of life and choices that Earlene will have. The space in which Earlene loses her virginity evokes danger and visual violation. As Beal leads Earlene up to the attic, he “feels for a chain. The attic blooms into a *hideous, glaring*, gray light. There are blankets strewn on the unfinished attic floor, pink Fiberglas still in rolls in one corner. Two young boys are asleep here” (133, emphasis mine). Beal “*scrapes up* some blankets” to make a bed, as Earlene observes the “curtainless” window, “busy with spiders,” and is watched by the boys, whose “eyes twinkle” (133, 134, emphasis mine). The single light bulb, something meant to drive away darkness and fear, instead “screams” at Earlene and “almost blinds her” (134). Earlene finds no comfort or safety in the attic and is instead watched, and laughed at. Further, those who witness her violation seem undisturbed by it. As Beal has his way with her and “sniffs at her throat, blows into her yellow hair,” Earlene imagines her Uncle’s instructions for surviving a

¹¹⁷ Cynthia Ward’s essay focuses largely on this misreading on the part of Chute’s reviewers. She notes that “powerful reverberations of this jarring *we-they* discourse can be heard in the language of Chute’s reviewers, who, though normally sensitive to ‘difference,’ remain blind to any humanity in her characters—the Beans in particular” (76).

bear attack. He tells her that “the black bear is only curious. You just gotta remember: *Never* scream” (135). Playing dead and staying quiet will keep you safe in a bear attack if you are lucky, but her uncle also notes that bears are fickle creatures and “they been known to rip you up” for no reason at all (135). Earlene tries to hold still beneath Beal, but eventually “her arms and legs struggle, [and Beal] pushes her harder into the boards, rocks his monstrous weight,” and Earlene “screams into [Beal’s] face, a high-pitched wail” (135). None of this fazes Beal, and, after he is finished with her, Earlene jumps up and inspects her abdomen that she is sure has been torn apart. She is certain that Roberta, alerted by Earlene’s screams, will come up the stairs “to see what’s the matter,” but no one comes. It would seem that the only one unnerved by Earlene’s situation is Earlene.

In the postscript to the “finished” version of *Beans*, Chute argues that the attic scene is not rape because “Earlene never says no” (1995, 275). While this is true—Earlene never says the word “no”—she expresses reluctance and fear, and vocalizes protest before giving in to Beal. As Beal undresses, Earlene tells him that she “‘ain’t gonna do nuthin’, you know ... you know ... with you [Beal]’,” to which Beal replies “‘Earlene ... you are grown up, remember? You c-ah-aaah-can handle this!’” (134). Katherine Adams responds to critics’ attempts to label the scene rape and Chute’s refusal of that label by suggesting that sexual interactions in the novel, and in this scene in particular, defy easy identification and highlight the invisibility of the working-class female body in broad ways:

The scene deflects attempts to identify the sex as simply consensual or compelled; Earlene exhibits both fear and desire, resistance and volition.

Slogans like “no means no” and “it’s rape if the woman says it is” demonstrate that one of the key battles in rape activism is for the right of women to make public meaning of their bodies and boundaries. Here, where the woman in question says neither “no” nor “rape,” the strong impulse among critics to say it for her reveals an important slippage between advocacy *for* silenced women and monological interpretation *of* them. (17)

Adams’s argument that these scenes strip the reader of the power to categorize this sex act is valid, but seems to dismiss the question of *why* Earlene does not say “no” or “rape.” Earlene does not voice her protest in the attic with Beal, not because she is not fearful, or does not want to resist, but because she does not know that she has access to a voice.¹¹⁸ Earlene identifies herself in opposition to the Beans early in her life, and thus recognizes the ways in which “white trash” and middle-class people are viewed differently in the public realm. However, Earlene relinquishes her rights to be safe in public or to have a public voice when she runs away from home and inadvertently joins herself to the maligned Beans. Earlene’s choices are now more limited, and she chooses silence not as a form of consent but as a form of protection. While Earlene was a loud and outspoken child, she becomes comparatively still and silent in her life with Beal. Just as she imagines playing dead to avoid being mauled by the bear/Beal during sex, Earlene keeps quiet throughout the novel to stay alive.

¹¹⁸ Heather Tapley argues that Chute remedies Earlene’s lack of voice by “allowing Earlene to narrate the text” (15).

The scene toward the end of the novel in which Beal forces Earlene to have sex with him on their front porch reveals Earlene's continued need to feign silence and death in order to survive. Moving the sexual violation from the attic to the front porch, a space that is more accessible to prying eyes (even if, in this case, there are fewer witnesses to the act), combines surveillance and invasion.¹¹⁹ After forbidding Earlene to sign up for food stamps, Beal goes out and Earlene puts herself and her starving infant to bed. Some time in the night, Earlene finds that Beal has been sitting on the porch for hours, unable to hunt because his flashlight has no batteries, and because his injured eye and weakened state, caused by infection and fever, make him clumsy in the woods. In his frustration with his inability to provide for his family, to be the kind of man he believes he should be, Beal sobs and says that he "ain't worth a piss," that he's no good and "musta come outta [his] mother's asshole" (179). Attempting to reassert his masculinity in the only way left to him, Beal shifts from belittling himself to debasing Earlene. Ignoring Earlene's protests and the piercing cries of the baby in the next room, Beal tells Earlene that he "NEEDS" sex and that he wants it "dog-style" right where they are on the front porch. Despite Earlene's disbelief that he could possibly want to be intimate in his current medical state, or her exclamations that Beal is "nuts," Beal insists and Earlene

¹¹⁹ This scene, as with the scene of Earlene and Beal's first sexual encounter, has been the subject of much discussion and debate, both by critics and Chute herself. In the postscript to the final version of the novel, Chute addresses the critics who view the porch scene as rape and argues that it is instead "a scene of 'hell' in which Earlene and Beal are both raped by America's big corporate consumerist culture, modern education's absurd aspirations, fast-lane America. And here, the lives of Beal and Earlene in ruins, all that's left for comfort, all that's left for dignity is sex. Especially for Beal, who has failed so enormously as a provider" (276). In some ways, this explanation of the scene has its merits and demands that readers and critics more closely examine their assumptions about what marriage, sex, and comfort might look like. But Chute's explanations of this scene, by so thoroughly denying Beal's brutal treatment of Earlene, attempt to erase all consideration of the sexual politics at work in the novel in favor of a strictly class-based assessment. The final lines of the porch scene show that there is nothing "comforting" about this sex for Earlene.

gives in. As Beal makes his demands, Earlene says that she is “so amazed that little stars of light drift sideways across [her] eyes” (181). While Beal “paws” at her nightgown, Earlene turns around and is then, in a repetition of the attic scene earlier in the novel, thrown to the floor: “The weight of Beal collapsing on my back makes me sprawl on my face” (181). Near fainting, from “the smell of his eye” Earlene does everything she can to remove herself mentally from the situation by holding her breath and “flatten[ing] [her] lungs right out” (181). While Beal might find comfort in this act, Earlene knows only that this is a violation, that Beal’s “teeth chatter, and so do his bones, everything crazily aquiver and out of control. The hands are hot. The penis hot. The cries at the nape of my neck hot. Dark damp hot. Hot as Hell” (181). Even if Beal is, as Chute suggests, driven to seek comfort in sex, to assert his masculinity in a society that denies him autonomy and selfhood because of his class, he achieves his goals by violating and humiliating his wife, not only within the space that should be the safest, but in public view.

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*

We lived on one porch or another all summer long, laughing at Little Earle, teasing the boys and picking over beans, listening to stories, or to the crickets beating out their own soft songs. When I think of that summer—sleeping over at one of my aunts' houses as easily as at home, the smell of Mama's neck as she bent over to hug us in the dark, the sound of Little Earle's giggle or Granny's spit, [...] I always feel safe again. No place has ever seemed so sweet and quiet, no place ever felt so much like home.

— Dorothy Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina*

Dorothy Allison's 1992 novel *Bastard out of Carolina* also considers the potential power of spaces that working-class women and girl children occupy. Significant home spaces abound in this novel about women who struggle to find happiness and worth in a world that pushes them down. The novel, set in Greenville, South Carolina in the 1950s and early 1960s, is the first-person account of Ruth Anne Boatwright, nicknamed "Bone," and her victimization at the hands of her stepfather Daddy Glen Waddell and eventual abandonment by her mother. The novel begins by telling the story of Bone's birth. Pregnant and without a husband at just fifteen, Bone's mother, Anney, is in the back seat of her brother Travis's car, enjoying "her first deep sleep in eight months" when Travis, probably drunk, crashes the car into oncoming traffic and sends Anney through the windshield. Anney is in a coma for three days and thus is unable to convince the doctors that she is married. Because of this, Bone is "certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (3). Bone struggles with this designation, and with its implication that she and the rest of her family are trash, throughout the novel. Within the first few chapters, Anney marries a man named Lyle Parsons and gets pregnant with Bone's little sister Reese, loses her husband in another

car accident, and meets and marries Glen Waddell. Glen enters the narrative already ostracized from his middle-class family and yearning to marry Anney, “marry the whole Boatwright legend, shame his daddy and shock his brothers” (13). After Glen and Anney lose their only child together (Anney miscarries and is no longer able to have children), Glen begins beating and molesting Bone, acts that culminate at the end of the novel in a brutal rape. As Glen, Anney, Reese, and Bone move from one house to another, the one-on-one violence perpetrated by Glen intersects with the damaging effects of enforced transience and stifling poverty.

Just as in *Beans*, the home spaces in *Bastard out of Carolina* highlight the power of the middle-class dream of home to delimit the boundaries of proper domesticity. Although most of the Boatwrights seem somewhat impervious to suggestions that their houses do not live up to middle-class standards, Glen Waddell, who is from a middle-class family, struggles with the disparity between the houses he can afford and the kind of house he thinks he ought to have. Since Glen was raised in a middle-class home, he is accustomed to standards of living and behavior that a working-class income cannot support. Bone recognizes his hunger for respectability at the heart of his violence and knows how much it eats at him that he cannot manage the lifestyle his family enjoys. The occasional trips Glen, Anney, Bone, and Reese take to Glen’s family’s houses underscore the difference between what Glen has and what his brothers have: “Daddy Glen’s brothers lived in big houses they owned, with fenced-in yards and flowering bushes. [...] More than anything Daddy Glen wanted a house like Daryl and James had—a new house with a nice lawn and picture windows framed in lined curtains” (80-

81). The desire for middle-class respectability is defined almost exclusively in the novel in terms of the recognizable codes of middle-class domesticity. Glen's family thinks he has married into "trash" largely because Glen cannot afford to keep Anney and the children in proper housing, and because Anney, unlike Glen's brothers' wives, has to work. The houses that Glen rents (and sometimes even buys) are "shabby imitations" of his brothers' houses, but Glen, Anney, Bone, and Reese do everything they can manage to improve upon them.

Just as Glen becomes white trash when he marries Anney and into the Boatwright family, he *stays* white trash because of his inability to move himself—both in geographic and occupational terms—out of poverty. The term "white trash" is particularly interesting in this novel because whiteness is such an unstable category in *Bastard out of Carolina*. While white trash is understood as a kind of failed whiteness in all of the texts in this study, the term is more active in this text because *Bastard* specifically aligns white trash with blackness in its descriptions of Bone, her family, and their spaces. When Bone's Aunt Fay moves into a house in the country with a wide front porch with room underneath for children and dogs to play, Glen calls it a "nigger shanty" (82). Likewise, when Aunt Alma moves her children into an apartment, her husband expresses outrage that his children are "living in that dirty place with niggers all around" (86). In addition to being socially ostracized because of their poverty and trashiness, the Boatwright women who move too far beyond the physical, geographical boundaries deemed appropriate for their class risk being labeled not just "trash," but "nigger." Bone understands the similar social meanings of the two words when her

friend Shannon Pearl rejects a black church full of good singers as beneath her father's consideration. Shannon's use of the word "nigger" bothers Bone because she recognizes that it is affiliated with the way people see the Boatwrights and notes that "The way Shannon said 'nigger' tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering 'trash' when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (170). One of Bone's schoolmates even goes so far as to use "trash," "nigger," and "bastard" interchangeably: "When I started school, one of the Yarboro cousins [...] had called me a nigger after I pushed her away from the chair I'd taken for mine. She'd sworn I was as dark and wild as any child 'born on the wrong side of the porch,' which I took to be another way of calling me a bastard" (54). The Boatwrights fail to maintain proper standards of middle-class domesticity—a domesticity that is understood as white—and thus are denied access to the privileges of whiteness. However, it is only when they stop attempting to live up to middle-class standards of housing and domestic practices that they are associated with blackness. Glen believes that he can hold off demeaning labels as long as his house is in a "good neighborhood," but Bone recognizes that all of the houses Glen finds for them are "shabby imitations" of the houses his brothers live in, and that her family is trash because it has always been trash. When Bone's aunts Fay and Alma choose to move into houses that are visibly different and geographically removed from the "tract houses" that Glen rents, they announce their rejection of middle-class ideals and align themselves with aberrant domesticity and desires, which in the South are often further aligned with blackness.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ See Bousoin for a discussion of Bone's racial difference and its connection to whiteness and trash (107).

Perhaps because they know that houses are not enough, by themselves, to fend off fear and degradation, Bone's family often works diligently to improve upon their domestic spaces. If the structures are substandard, the housekeeping that takes place in and around them is not. Anney "sewed curtains, washed windows, and polished floors. Daddy Glen mowed the grass and sent us out with scissors to dig up the weeds along the driveway. He yelled at [Uncle] Earle and Beau if they drove up on the grass, and he chased the dogs that came and knocked over our garbage cans in the night" (81). But even the best efforts to establish a middle-class home are bound to fail if there is not a middle-class income to support it. The Boatwrights cannot afford to tend to their homes as a middle-class family might, having to sew curtains rather than buy them, or use scissors to weed the lawn, and their lack of funds mean that they are never in one house long enough to build on their hard work. Bone notes that her aunts also move frequently, "all of them but Aunt Raylene who had rented the same house for most of her adult life," but that all of their houses "tended to resemble each other" (79). Her aunts live in older houses that have porches to go to when the summer heat makes the indoors unbearable. Although Glen seeks out certain kinds of houses for their similarity to his brothers' houses, it is actually this similarity that highlights the houses' deficiencies. Bone's aunts do not try to mimic middle-class domesticity and thus the need to move so often does not reflect a failure to be middle-class. Glen's houses, on the other hand, are "tract houses with white slatted walls and tin-roofed carports, [...] jalousie windows, [...] and garbage disposals that never worked" (79). The houses are visibly inadequate, causing

one of Bone's cousins to define the houses as "unloved, [...] houses where it looks like nobody ever really wanted to live" (79).

A significant difference between the working-class, white-trash homes in *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* and those in *Bastard out of Carolina* is that while most of the homes in *Beans* are privately owned by their inhabitants, the Boatwrights in *Bastard out of Carolina* rent their homes. While owning a home is not in and of itself a guarantee of safety or security—mortgages are as difficult to pay as rent is—ownership does minimize the chances of being forcibly removed from one's home. Since Glen is determined to live a life as close to that of his brothers' as he can, he rents houses that he cannot really afford. Glen looks down upon the rest of the Boatwrights and their "houses with their coal-grate fireplaces and chicken coops in the backyard," and tells Travis that he "wouldn't live in your place if you paid me" (79). Glen's ideals blind him to the fact that he is actually just like Travis and no better situated to make demands about the kind of house he lives in than the Boatwrights are. Used to the idea of being working class, Travis understands that he is at the mercy of his landlord and tells Glen that "The problem is, Glen boy, you got to pay them landlords, and hell, they don't care what we think about nothing, what kind of place we think we want to rent" (79). Having a landlord puts Glen and all of the Boatwrights at the mercy of an outside authoritarian force that is unconcerned about the needs or desires of those who serve it. Further, when renting a house, the residents forgo their right to privacy since landlords can demand entrance at any time.

The amount and kinds of surveillance at work in *Beans* are only heightened in *Bastard* because the houses are not even temporarily their own. Although Glen and Anney do buy the houses they live in on two separate occasions, it is understood that they will not be able to stay in them. They cannot afford the mortgages and Bone knows that the “brand new houses” were “bought on time [they] didn’t have” (64). Anney and Glen do not make enough money to pay their bills on time and are therefore watched and hounded by bill-collectors who “started coming to the door during the day. They’d bang on the jamb after ringing the bell. [...] The men and women who came to our door would wheedle and threaten, cajole and rage. They’d call Mama’s name so loud all the neighbors could hear” (82). While the bill-collectors threaten to remove belongings or services, the greater damage is done when they call Anney’s name so that “all the neighbors could hear.” Being singled out in this way calls attention to their difference and marks the family as trash. While many families are likely struggling in similar ways, Anney and Glen breach a social contract by allowing their financial problems out in the open. Since Glen’s desire for a middle-class house requires that they live far away from Bone’s aunts and Anney’s support system, Anney is on her own and vulnerable when the bill collectors come to her door. Bone and Reese do their best to fend off the invaders, and listen earnestly when Anney tells her daughters that just because they cannot always pay all of their bills on time does not make them bad people. But the men and women who pound on their door, who threaten their sense of safety and privacy within their home-space, are more convincing. Because of them, Bone and Reese “knew what the neighbors called [them], what Mama wanted to protect [them] from. [They] knew who

[they] were” (82). They know that “proper” people pay their bills, and only “trash” is harassed at home in the middle of the day.

Critic J. Brooks Bouson examines the effect of shame on impoverished whites and argues that situations such as Bone’s, in which there is no privacy because her family is constantly being watched by their “betters,” perpetuate “self-hatred and self-contempt” (103). She argues that being surveilled is particularly damaging because “the individual feels exposed and humiliated—*looked at*—with contempt for being inferior, flawed, or dirty” (103). This kind of shame is clearly at work in the girls’ interactions with the bill collectors, and is also present when Anney takes Bone to the hospital after a particularly savage beating by Glen that breaks her collarbone for the second time. At the hospital, Bone is treated by a “young” doctor who “glared and ordered lots of X-rays” (113). Clearly angry, he “leaned over [Anney] like he was going to hit her,” and demands to know how Bone suffered the additional injuries to her tailbone (113). With no one else to blame for Bone’s injuries, the doctor assumes that Anney has been beating her and asks her “What have you been hitting this child with? Or have you just been throwing her up against the wall?” (113). Although the doctor seems to believe that he is doing his duty by attempting to remove Bone from her violent situation, Bone knows that what he really sees is not a “child” but a despicable piece of trash. As he grabs her chin and demands that she tell him the truth, Bone sees herself in his eyes and knows that he is “angry, and impatient, and disgusted” (114). Moments like this one work to perpetuate the shame that maintains the inertia of the working-class characters in these texts. In her essay “A Question of Class,” Allison discusses her understanding, early on,

that poverty was nothing “noble,” or “heroic,” and that the effect of not fitting into the “myth of poverty” in America was to continue the cycle of shame:

There was an idea of the good poor—hard-working, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn’t keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; [...] We were not noble, not grateful, not even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised. My family was ashamed of being poor, of feeling hopeless. What was there to work for, to save money for, to fight for or struggle against? We had generations before us to teach us that nothing ever changed, and that those who did try to escape failed. (*Skin* 18)

When the doctor at the hospital reveals his contempt for Anney and Bone, they know that there is little hope of finding help out of their violent situation, or even of being treated for injuries without insult being added on.

While the constant threat of invasion and judgment by landlords, bill collectors, and doctors defines the way that Bone understands her relationship to middle-class respectability, she self-identifies as worthless because of the invasions that come from within her own family and her own home space. Throughout the novel Bone shuttles between multiple spaces that are at once confining and sheltering, dangerous and empowering. The spaces of the bathroom, bedroom, car, and porch carry with them specific, gender coded markers. They are all spaces that have traditionally been viewed

as appropriate or inappropriate sites for women and as such, are particularly ripe for refiguration in this novel. From the time Bone is nine-years-old Glen repeatedly beats and molests her. The implication is that Glen beats and molests Bone because of his inability to be the kind of man his father expects him to be. The connection between working-class longing for middle-class domesticity and respectability and violence enacted within the home indicates a corruption—a bastardization—of the American Dream. White trash figures are denied access to the home dream, and suffer or become violent because of this denial. Thus, it is the American Dream itself that perpetuates the suffering and shame of white trash. Shawn E. Miller argues that Glen’s violence “must ultimately be seen as a symptom of dislocation” and that he is “an exile” from all that is central, normal, and worthy in middle-class America. Thus, he “finds that he can orient himself at the center of his own patriarchal establishment, a process that involves bending or breaking those within reach until they conform” (146). Unlike the image of a financially secure, middle-class, white, male, Glen’s circle of influence is confined to those with whom he has actual physical contact and can force into submission through violence. The primary victim of Glen’s attempts to “orient” himself is Bone. Rather than finding solace within the home from an inhospitable world that looks down on and laughs at “trash” like the Boatwrights, Bone is most at risk in her own house.

The most dangerous domestic space in the novel is the bathroom. This room, traditionally seen as a space of women’s beauty and cleaning rituals, as well as a private space meant for the personal business of the body, becomes a site of invasion and violence when Glen drags Bone into the room and beats her with his belt. Glen’s

beatings always take place within the home and usually in the bathroom.¹²¹ Minrose Gwin, in her essay “Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse,” argues that Allison attempts to join her characters and her reader when she pushes Bone into small spaces and the reader into scenes from which we would like to escape. In effect, she says, “we as readers are placed in the space of the object. We become Bone” (434). The effect of this “claustrophobic experience” is to force the reader into a position of vicarious suffering in which we are neither truly “outside looking into that bathroom,” as Anney often is, nor inside it. Instead, the reader is “inside a textual space that reproduces material female space under patriarchy—a space that will be violated by rape by the end of the novel” (434). In the small space of the bathroom, made dangerous rather than reassuringly private when Glen locks the door, Glen undermines Bone’s sense of herself as an individual being worthy of respect or love. He ignores Anney’s screams from beyond the locked door and seems to lose sight of what he is doing to Bone, his “blows hitting the wall as often as they hit [her]” (234). Although Bone recognizes that she is merely an outlet for Glen’s rage—almost as good to him as a blank wall—she also internalizes his hatred of her and believes that she is the “little bitch,” “little cunt,” and “*goddam little bastard*” that he calls her (106, 284). Vincent King argues that Glen “uses a barrage of names to ‘break’ [Bone]” (128). If he is not her biological father, and cannot adopt Bone, as he initially told Anney he would, he can make her part of him by naming her. The power of this naming supports King’s claims that Bone “instinctively

¹²¹ Gillian Harkins refers to the moments of violence within the home as “domestic scenes” and argues that the majority of Glen’s violence toward Bone occurs there because it is the only space in which Glen has the privacy to act on his own rather than being scripted or hampered by either the Boatwrights or the Waddells (125).

understands that her identity, far from being stable or fixed, is transactional—the result of the ongoing conflict between the names and stories thrust upon her by others and those she creates for herself” (124). Such a conflict is not uncommon in adolescence, and is often the result of a child’s ongoing experiences and growth. What makes Bone’s situation different is the fact that she has no safe space in which to establish a stable identity. Alone in the bathtub one afternoon, Bone examines her body, looking for signs of maturity or beauty, and determines that “No part of me was that worshipful, dreamy-eyed storybook girlchild, no part of me was beautiful” (208). The domestic spaces that might otherwise provide Bone with room in which to safely explore her body and imagine the kind of person she wants to be are infused with violence and degradation and speak to Bone only of her failure to be the “right” kind of girl.

In another reversal of socially-coded spaces, the bedroom, long associated with sexual domination by men and domestic violence toward women becomes the space in which both Bone and her sister Reese explore their own sexuality and fantasize about escape and empowerment. Although Bone is still too young to completely understand the implications of what Glen is doing to her,¹²² she instinctively connects violence and sex when she begins to have violent fantasies while masturbating. Bone is unable to control the beatings but discovers agency in her fantasy life. She states that her “fantasies got more violent and more complicated as Daddy Glen continued to beat [her] with the same two or three belts he’d set aside for [her]” (112). Although her fantasies

¹²² Bone does not know, for example, that Glen “rapes” her in the car while waiting for her mother to give birth, but only that Glen has hurt her and violated her. It is only later, when she sees Glen and Anney together that she starts to understand that what happened in the car might have had something to do with sex.

involve her own subjugation, they also allow her to control other people by imagining that they are forced to watch her being beaten:

When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street, [...] They couldn't help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I'd stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. [...] Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

In her imaginary beatings, Bone is “able to defy Daddy Glen,” to find “pride,” and to refuse her shame and stand “triumphant, important” (113).¹²³ Although Bone often leaves the house to indulge her fantasies, the most subversive sexual explorations occur within her own bedroom. During a period in which Bone and her sister Reese are not getting along, Bone ascertains that Reese's fantasy life rivals her own, and that Reese

¹²³ Harkins considers Bone's earlier fantasies of death by fire as Bone's attempts to “transmogrify” her real beatings into fantasies over which she has control. She further states that “Bone's fantasies seem to remake the foreclosed realist scene [of her beating] into a fantasy of the redemptive spectacle” (129). King also considers the potential power of Bone's fantasies, but argues that they “lack the ‘magic’ to liberate her” because “instead of giving her the hope of a remade life, these fantasies [...] simply add to her shame” (131). Bone believes herself to be doubly defective because she is beaten *and* because she fantasizes about being beaten.

frequently masturbates in their shared bedroom.¹²⁴ This discovery works to empower both when they silently agree to help each other maintain the safety and privacy of the bedroom. This space of male, sexual domination attains female power when Bone and Reese work together to protect it. Bone notes that she and Reese “never talked about [their] private games, [their] separate hours alone in the bedroom. These days [they] barely talked at all. But [they] made sure no one else ever went in the bedroom when one of [them] was there alone” (176). While both the bathroom and the bedroom are sites of degradation and physical and sexual violence in the novel, Allison opens them up both for observation and potentially for expansion.

Perhaps the biggest threat to Bone’s ability to establish safe spaces in which to learn about herself and become a more confident young woman is the fact that she is constantly being uprooted from the spaces she commandeers for herself. Unable to buy a house, like Glen’s brothers do, Bone’s family must rent what they can find and move to new houses when they are unable to make the rent. This frequent movement from one house to another undermines middle-class ideals of domestic security. Even though Bone might not long for an “ideal” middle-class home, preferring the more unorthodox spaces of her aunts and cousins, she does desire a safe and stable space. Since Glen is unable to afford the kind of home he wants, and since that necessitates the family’s constant relocation, stability becomes something unattainable. Bone feels the stress of constant relocation and says that “Moving gave [her] a sense of time passing and

¹²⁴ Reese’s young age, her seemingly violent sexual fantasies, and Glen’s history with Bone seem to indicate that Glen is probably violating Reese, although this is never revealed in the novel. Following the scene in which Anney takes Bone to the hospital to be treated for a broken collar bone, Bone comes back to the car and notices that Reese is sitting in the front seat next to Glen “with her thumb in her mouth, her face blank and still” (115).

everything sliding, as if nothing could be held on to anyway. It made [her] feel ghostly, unreal and unimportant, like a box that goes missing and then turns up but you realize you never needed anything in it anyway” (65). While the women in the previous chapter viewed mobility as potentially empowering, and as a way to redefine domesticity, movement shifts from a powerful option to an enforced difficulty in the working-class homes in *Bastard*. Some of this difficulty comes from the fact that, as working-class people, Bone’s parents have less job security and less income than do middle-class families, and as such are less able to pay their bills on time. Equally troubling, however, is the way in which mobility dislocates the characters in this text. Rather than defining themselves by movement and its powerful potential to break the boundaries between domestic space and public space, the individuals in *Bastard* are defined by their lack of stability. Since their mobility is not a choice, they feel no sense of ownership over it. Bone recognizes that she is paradoxically fixed by her perpetual movement and longs for a life in which movement is hers to control. The reality of Bone’s options becomes clear when she considers her Aunt Raylene, a woman who left home at seventeen to join the carnival. The allures of Raylene’s adventures are multiple and combine with Bone’s desires to be mobile and to become someone else. Away from home, “Raylene had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She’d called herself Ray, and with her short, stocky build, big shoulders, and small breasts, [...] no one had questioned her” (179). Bone thinks “with wistful longing” about similarly embracing masculinity—cutting her hair and learning to smoke—in order to gain access to the kind of mobility her male cousins have, because she knows that “a girl

couldn't go roaming so easily" (179). But the dangers of being a girl impersonating a man are the same as they were for the cross-dressing tramps at the beginning of the century; Raylene is physically scarred from her time in the carnival and unwilling to talk about her experiences there.

Allison largely denies the possibility of female mobility when she turns Raylene, the novel's most mobile character, into its most domestically stable. One moment that offers the potential for reclaiming the power of female mobility comes toward the end of the novel when Bone leaves the apartment her mother has rented to get the girls away from Glen and walks to Raylene's house. Bone leaves her mother out of anger and confusion, and walks in order to gain control. Once at her aunt's house, Bone's fantasies shift from proud defiance in the face of entrapment to blind movement. Bone imagines a mythical road that not only takes her away from her life, but also does not demand a final destination: "Cars passed at a roar but did not stop, and the north star shone above their headlights like a beacon. I walked that road alone, my legs swinging easily as I covered the miles. No one stopped. No one called to me. Only the star guided me, and I was not sure where I would end" (259). The fantasy of this road is that it provides escape as well as anonymity. As I argued in the previous chapter, female mobility is always tied to surveillance, objectification, and the potential for physical violence. When Ann from *Anywhere but Here* walks, she finds the road alienating and frightening as well as emboldening. Bone's road is fictive and thus free of the dangers of actual movement.

The spaces of domesticity are so significant in this novel, and in all the novels examined in this chapter, because they highlight the material ways in which working-

class domesticity differs from middle-class domesticity. But a domestic space only becomes domestic when someone engages in domestic practices within it. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways that the work of home—the cultivation of home as an idea as well as the labor involved in maintaining a space—in the Boatwright houses marks them as working-class, or even as white trash. Since, as I have already discussed, Bone and her family do not inhabit one domestic space for very long, much of the work typically associated with housekeeping falls by the wayside. While Anney always attempts to make the houses Glen finds into the kinds of homes she is used to, by sewing curtains, digging up plots for gardens she will never get to plant, airing out the rooms, or scrubbing the windows, for example, they leave the houses before they have the chance to settle in. Despite their constant relocation, however, one domestic chore that is always with them is that of acquiring and cooking food. Allison represents food as something connected to tradition and family, to labor and work, and to desires and want. In all of these connections, relationships to food signify truths about class. Descriptions of food inundate this novel. Bone's mother works in a diner and, in his first description of Anney to Glen, Earle tells him that Anney makes "the best gravy in the county, the sweetest biscuits" (11). This description, and its tie later in the novel to Bone's dreams of "gravy like mother's milk singing in your bloodstream," establishes Anney as one who nurtures and provides spiritual sustenance through the food she serves (71). Glen's first taste of Anney's food "sang to his throat" and puts him in mind of sex (11). Anney's food has the power to lure and hold both men and children. But, Anney is further linked to food in that she comes home covered in the sweat and grease of her job, smelling like the diner.

Her back is bent from working to harvest other people's crops and her smile is forced and false after so many years depending on tips.

Establishing Anney's connection to food so early in the novel makes the difficulty she later has in providing food to her children all the more profound. She goes to work everyday in a place awash in food, but when she comes home, she has nothing to feed her children. After Glen rents the house far away from the rest of the Boatwrights, Anney loses her support system and has to depend on Glen's and her own income to pay the bills and buy food. With Glen in and out of part-time jobs, there is rarely enough money to go around, and Bone and Reese sometimes go hungry. Bone and Reese find ways to earn income by collecting bottles for the deposit money, and Anney does hair for women she knows from the diner, but eventually they don't even have enough money to make the standard meal of "flour-and-water biscuits with bacon-fat gravy to pour over them" that they'd made do with in the past (72). One evening, with only soda crackers and ketchup to serve for dinner, Anney fills up her children with stories and games instead of food. She recounts the hard times she experienced as a child and the "gross-out" fantasy meals she and her siblings would compete to invent. As she feeds her children their pitiful meal, she distracts them from their hunger by "all the time laughing and teasing and tickling [their] shoulders with her long nails as she walked back and forth" (73). Unable to depend on Glen to provide for the family, Anney goes out to find food. Before she leaves she cleans herself, "outlines her mouth in bold red lipstick," pulls on new hose, "patent-leather high heels," and "a clean bra and one of the sleeveless red pullover sweaters she'd gotten from her friend Mab down at the diner—

the one Mab joked was made to show just how high her tits could point” (74). Although the narrative does not follow Anney out the door, her attire and the fact that she returns with a bag full of groceries suggests that she has traded sexual or romantic favors for the money to buy groceries, once again tying Anney to food and sex. But Anney has lost the power to nourish through food alone and the biscuits she makes for Bone and Reese “stuffed [them] but didn’t satisfy” (78).

Anney’s cooking cannot fill Bone because her hunger goes far deeper than a corporeal need for food. More profound than physical want is the desire Bone feels to be treated with respect rather than as trash. Bone first speaks of hunger as a longing for the things she sees around her that she is not allowed to touch. When Anney takes Bone to the Woolworth’s store so she can return a couple of stolen tootsie rolls, the manager bans Bone from the store until such time as Anney sees fit to ask his permission to let her back in. Bone knows that she will never set foot in the store again and feels the desire for the objects around her like a hollowness she does not know how to fill: “It was hunger I felt then, raw and terrible, a shaking deep down inside me, as if my rage had used up everything I had ever eaten” (98). She also knows that hunger when she visits Glen’s brothers’ houses and knows that they scorn her. Bone and Reese are confined to the backyard while their step-cousins “went in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, tracking mud in on the braided rugs” (101). The injustice of this treatment coupled with the beautiful things that Bone can see through the window-glass tears at her and creates a hunger that stops her voice and builds to a heat that Bone wishes would “pour out and

burn everything up, everything they had that we couldn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us" (103).

Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone*

There were two hundred Dollys, plus Lockrums, Boshells, Tankerslys, and Langan, who were basically Dollys by marriage, living within thirty miles of this valley. Some lived square lives, many did not, but even the square-living Dollys were Dollys at heart and might be helpful kin in a pinch. The rough Dollys were plenty peppery and hard-boiled toward one another, but were unleashed hell on enemies, scornful of town law and town ways, clinging to their own. Sometimes when Ree fed Sonny and Harold oatmeal suppers they would cry, sit there spooning down oatmeal but crying for meat, eating all there was while crying for all there could be, become wailing little cyclones of want and need, and she would fear for them.
— Daniel Woodrell, *Winter's Bone*

In Debra Granik's 2010 film adaptation of Daniel Woodrell's novel *Winter's Bone*, concerns about individuality, women's rights and empowerment, or the reconstruction of domestic space are almost entirely effaced by the realities of survival. Many of the troubling aspects of the white-trash spaces seen in *Beans* and *Bastard*—lack of security, invasion and surveillance, lack of food and basic necessities, lack of mobility, and violence toward women—are distilled in this text. While watching the film it is difficult to see how its female protagonist might attain the things that she desires. Her wants are simple ones: to safeguard her house and family against those who want to steal them from her and to escape the crushing poverty that requires she be the one to uphold the security of her domestic space. The film is set in the present day Missouri Ozarks and tells the story of Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence), a seventeen-year-old girl who cares for her mentally ill mother and younger brother and sister in her outlaw

father's absence. Ree's mother is unable to participate in child-rearing or other domestic work because her husband's infidelities and cruelty have caused her to break with reality. She sits by the fire, and sometimes helps to fold clothes, but cannot wash her own hair, or even offer Ree advice. Early in the film, the sheriff comes to Ree's house and informs her that her father, Jessup, who has recently been arrested again for cooking methamphetamines, put up their house and timber land for his bail. Ree and her family will lose everything they have if Jessup does not show up for his court date just a few days in the future. Jessup does not appear in court and Ree suspects that someone in the area has killed her father. The bulk of the narrative involves Ree's attempts to circumvent the strict codes of her extended family and find her father, dead or alive, so that she and her family will not be thrown out of their house.

The opening shots of the film foreground its concern with desperate, impoverished domesticity. The first few scenes show an old clapboard house, surrounded by mounds of children's toys, trash, and debris. A trampoline stands just past the porch and Ree's six-year-old sister, Ashlee (Ashlee Thompson) bounces around on it with a large stuffed horse while her twelve-year-old brother, Sonny (Isaiah Stone) is elsewhere in the yard, trying to skateboard in the dirt. Their yard calls to mind the Beans' yard, overflowing with a seemingly random array of junk. Much of the stuff in Ree's yard is children's toys, and therefore does not seem out of place. The sheer amount of junk, however, is unaccountable, and marks the space as white trash even before we learn the full extent of the Dolly's poverty and marginalization. Sweeney argues that this kind of display "fills a lack, covering every empty space with stuff and

effect” and that white trash employs this tactic because they are “powerless to do anything but collect junk and show it off” (250). This marks them, as Sweeney goes on to say, as “total consumers” who do not contribute to society by means of production. The figuration of white trash as blind consumers who heap their purchases about their yard and house, and who seem to do so without jobs or other “respectable” means of income, helps to reinforce the idea that white trash people are aberrant, uncouth, and easily dismissed.

As the film progresses, Ree calls the children in to dinner, caring for them as their mother should. The interior of the house mimics the grey and dingy tones of the yard and is so dim that it is hard to see. Ree rummages through the refrigerator looking for something to feed their emaciated dog and settles on a container of spoiled leftovers. Dinner for Ree and her family will be little better, consisting only of a few potatoes fried in lard. Ree’s domestic work goes beyond the kitchen and is exacerbated by the state of her house. The house is old and built to support a life-style that no longer exists in much of the United States. Her chores are those of a century ago—she chops wood, butchers meat, hunts squirrels, and washes and dries clothes by hand. More than being dreary and cold, the house is substandard in other ways. Although Jessup is not around to use his room, it is off-limits and Ashlee and Sonny are forced to sleep wrapped in blankets on the living-room furniture. Critic Martha P. Nochimson succinctly connects the film’s visual appearance with its thematic concentration on the suffering, and reclusiveness, of impoverished and forgotten people:

The film's pale, wintry terrain and minutely detailed, disordered interiors decorated by handmade objects from materials mostly found in nature, graphically depict both the seasonal desolation of the Ozarks and the domestic arrangements of a clan whose closest association with the consumer culture and bourgeois domestic order is an abundance of pickup trucks. (54)

This description suggests that the Dollys' domestic situation mirrors that of the harsh natural world around them. The implication here is that poverty pushes these white trash figures closer to a primitive state and aligns them with nature and animalism. Critic James Bell suggests that the "grey skies, the bleached colours, the wooden houses with their yards strewn with old furniture, cars and junk" evoke the Southern Gothic and indicate a way of life no longer lived in "regular" society (n.p.). In all of the texts in this chapter, houses are portrayed with equal frequency as exhibiting lack and excess. While they are unable to live up to the standards of the middle-class home (often they have no running water, no electricity, no food, no safe spaces), they signal to the casual passerby that they are white trash in other ways. Therefore, it is not their lack but their excess that is visible from the outside. The Beans' blue Christmas lights and junky yard, the Boatwrights' "nigger shanty" with slanted porches built into the hillside, and the Dollys' piles of toys and debris all announce that white trash lives there. As Beverly Skeggs notes, "The working-class have a long history of being represented by excess whilst the middle-class are represented by their distance from it, usually through associations with restraint, repression, reasonableness, modesty and denial" (99). Ree's house is

unreasonable, unrestrained, and immodest. Just as her yard appears overrun with things, the interior of the house gives off an aura of dirt and long-accumulated grease. Her Uncle Teardrop's house is portrayed similarly, with every inch of kitchen counter space taken over by a profusion of stuff. The disorganization of these spaces lends them a feeling of inertia. It is impossible for Ree or Teardrop to mimic middle-class domesticity and so, it seems, they do not even try. Unable to make something good, clean, or beautiful out of their home spaces, they simply let them go.

Despite its shortcomings, Ree's house is essential to her family's well-being. Even if the house is dirty, cluttered, or trashy, without it they will have nothing and will be "thrown out to live in the fields like dogs." In order to keep the house, Ree has to locate her father, something that the mountain clan, made up of a handful of interconnected families (most of whom are involved in drug making and trafficking), try to prevent her from doing. Nochimson notes, "This is a clan to be reckoned with and if someone has gone missing, there's a reason and no questions are supposed to be asked" (53). The fact that Ree's father was able to sacrifice his house and land, and thereby sacrifice his entire family, in order to make bail clearly connects the film's considerations of both domesticity and gender. In this scenario, the patriarch and the house are of equal worth and the family that actually lives in the house, made up of women and children, are worth nothing. Although the sheriff comes to the house and warns Ree that they will be thrown out if Jessup does not make his court date, it is clear that his motives center on a desire to apprehend Jessup rather than any particular civic obligation to Ree and her family. The connection between imperiled domesticity and

gender is extended by the fact that Ree must act like a man in order to save her house and her family. That Ree will enact both male and female gender roles is apparent from the beginning of the film in the clothes she wears and the work that she does. Although her work centers on the home, she also takes on tasks that would typically be considered men's work. In addition to chopping wood and hunting, Ree cares for the livestock and teaches her brother and sister how to hunt, acts that would be handled by her father if he was there to do them.¹²⁵

Ree's most significant breach of gender rules involves her search for her father. The clan that rules her community functions within strict codes of gender behavior that dictate sanctioned actions and movement. Since Ree does not have a vehicle, she must walk everywhere she goes and is therefore in constant motion throughout the film. Unlike Sylvie in *Housekeeping* or Anne *Anywhere but Here*, who discover their power (and their vulnerability too) by walking, Ree is seemingly oblivious to the possibility of movement as an expansive act. In all of the texts in this chapter, mobility is severely limited. While Adele and Ann look forward to their journey out West as an adventure, such movement is predicated on their ability to pay for it. Earlene, Bone, and Ree do not have such luxuries. If Earlene had had access to a car, she might have been able to sign up for food stamps and feed her baby. She might even have been able to avoid her descent into white trash life altogether if she had not had to depend on Beal to pick her up when she ran away from home. Likewise, Ree's domesticity is further circumscribed

¹²⁵ Woodrell's novel includes an additional scene in which Ree teaches her siblings (interestingly, they are both boys in the novel) how to box. The boxing gloves are too big for the boys' hands but fit Ree's perfectly.

by not having access to a vehicle. While she does spend a good deal of the film in cars, they are not hers and they expose her to violence as much as they precipitate her success. At the beginning of the film Ree's cousin, trying to convince her that her father was killed in a meth-lab explosion, demands that she get in his car so he can take her to the alleged site of Jessup's death. This car symbolizes Ree's vulnerability since she has no control over it or where it will take her, and she is rightfully afraid to get into it. Similarly, toward the end of the film, the clan women, having decided to put an end to the violence, take Ree to Jessup's remains. In order to do so, they bind her hands, cover her face with a burlap sack, and put her in the back of their car. Ree's travels with her Uncle Teardrop also expose her to danger and violence when the Sheriff pulls Teardrop over and the incident almost ends in a shoot out. The film ends when Ree secures her house by taking Jessup's severed hands to the Sheriff to prove that he did not skip bail. Ree's house is now safe, and the family has some money since the man who put up part of Jessup's bail never returned to claim it. Although the film does not say so, the novel indicates that Ree will buy a car with the money. This symbol of autonomous mobility, finally achieved, is summarily undercut by the fact that Ree has promised Sonny and Ashlee that she will stay with them and not join the Army. Her mobility will be confined to her immediate area and to tasks associated with being guardian to her siblings and mother.

Nonetheless, for much of the film, Ree's movement is subversive in that it removes her from her proper place in the home and allows her to take on a role that is not typically allowed to her. As she lopes across the hills and fields of the Ozarks—

significantly she is wearing mannish clothing that ill-fits her—she rejects all pronouncements that would keep her in her house, patiently waiting for her father to return, or for any of the authoritarian men—the sheriff or the bounty hunter—to find him for her. In order to seek information about her father, Ree first goes to her Uncle Teardrop (John Hawkes). Ree is initially denied an audience with Teardrop, having to first explain herself to her Aunt Victoria who then relays Ree’s requests to Teardrop. Victoria returns and explains that Teardrop is unwilling to talk to Ree or help her in any way beyond a limited financial contribution and the advice that she should get herself “on home” and stop asking questions. Teardrop puts a stop to Ree’s insistence that he help her find Jessup, his “only brother,” when he lunges across the kitchen, grabbing her by her hair and chin. Throughout this scene, Victoria, though clearly angered by Teardrop’s behavior, sits still and silent with her eyes averted. To align herself, even provisionally, with Ree and her needs would be breaking the rules of the clan, and would put Victoria in danger. Ree, however, does not have the option of behaving as she should and staying at home; she will not have a house for very long unless she finds a way to keep it. Pushing Teardrop’s warnings aside, Ree moves up the clan ladder and seeks and audience with the clan leader, Thump Milton.

Before getting to Thump, Ree must first contact a female cousin—her house guarded by dogs and exhaling the tell-tale smoke of a meth-lab—who warns her further but shows her the way to Thump’s compound up the mountain. At Thump’s, Ree is met at the door by Thump’s wife Merab (Dale Dickey), another female guardian, who tries repeatedly to send Ree away before reluctantly agreeing to speak to Thump about her.

But this is where Ree's luck ends. Rather than finding help in her search for Jessup, Ree receives only a sip of water and the knowledge that she will not be welcomed back a second time. Merab's offer of water is a meager hospitality, akin to Victoria's earlier gift to Ree of "a doobie for [her] walk." These gestures reveal the women's knowledge that they owe Ree something more than they are able to give her, both because "some of their blood's at least the same" and that's "supposed to mean something," and because they are women who are just as trapped within their homes and their clan's rules as Ree is. Their hospitality disappears altogether when Ree insists on overstepping clan conventions in her struggle to save her house. In an unusual twist of the standard portrayal of the violent white trash male, it is the clan women who capture and beat Ree when she comes to Thump's house a second time. Men, such as the Sheriff, the bail bondsman, Teardrop, and Thump, may establish laws and clan rules, but the women, just like the gossip-mongers in *The Virgin Suicides*, or the townswomen of *Housekeeping's* Fingerbone, act with the most force to protect their power and their way of life.

There are two ways to understand white trash homes. The first is that these homes represent the marginalized cast-offs of society's middle-class. The home spaces and the figures who occupy them are understood to be lacking, deviant, and dirty. They are a blot on a landscape that the middle-class works to figure as pristine, self-similar, and secure. In this figuration, white trash people and homes must be kept out of view, by being relegated to trailer parks, the outskirts of town, or easily avoidable neighborhoods, or removed through gentrification, urban renewal, and suburban sprawl. Complicating this idea of white trash are the clan-like families in *Beans*, *Bastard*, and *Winter's Bone*.

Although these families and the houses that they live in appear to be diametrically opposed to the suburban spaces and communities that I discussed in Chapter II, they are actually quite similar in terms of their regulatory practices. Central to the survival and identity construction of both suburbanites and white trash is an understanding of themselves as normal. In order to be normal, someone or something else must signal what is abnormal, what is to be avoided, what is to be kept out. In suburbia, the outside other shows himself by the color of his skin, the language that he speaks, or simply by his infidelity to standards of lawn care. Failure to maintain the boundaries of suburban life and culture (as well as space) would be to relinquish the privileges that come with being the unmarked norm. Among other categories of difference, white trash is considered outside of the norms of suburbia. But what is intriguing is the way that white trash counters this outside status not by asserting its normativity, but by building higher walls around white trash spaces and discouraging movement across the boundaries, either in or out. Such boundaries are most frequently enforced through the maintenance of family, or clan, ties. In *Winter's Bone*, family is essential to survival, but it does not guarantee help for Ree. For example, early in the film, Ree's cousins, who live across the road from her, hang meat in a tree where Ree and her siblings can see it. The cousins know that Ree and her family have almost nothing to eat, but they do not offer them any of the food right away. Sonny asks Ree if he thinks the cousins might bring them some meat. Simply by asking, Sonny has broken an unspoken code that demands that white trash be, above all else, self-sufficient. Ree instructs her brother to "never ask for what should be offered" and instead teaches him and their younger sister how to find their

own meals. Although the cousins do finally bring Ree some food, they seem more interested in checking to see if Ree has said more than she should to the Sheriff. Family provides sustenance but is more powerful in the ways that it encloses Ree and her mother, brother and sister.

While Ree is a Dolly, and the Dolly clan is hundreds strong, Ree finds no support in her quest to find her father and thus save her house. It is more important to the Dollys that their way of life remain untrammelled, even if it means that Ree and her family lose their house and land. Perhaps this fierce sequestering can be explained as a defense mechanism against the shaming language that defines white trash as worthless, diseased, and contaminating. If dominant society sees you as the middle-class figures in *Deliverance* do the “hillbillies” that they encounter, as full of “genetic deficiencies,” and not even “people,” is it any wonder that they would want to keep dominant society out? White trash’s desire to keep its members within the confines of the “othered” space can be similarly explained as a need to minimize their exposure to shame. When a white trash figure expresses a desire for something better, however that is defined, she highlights the failure and the undesirability of white-trash life. Therefore, when Earlene, Bone, and Ree express their dissatisfaction with their houses and their restricted lives, they cease to exist comfortably in any space. Suggesting that they might seek something better immediately cuts them off from full membership in their white trash clans, but it does not guarantee entrance into middle-class society. In fact, moving up financially or

socially seems a fantasy for all of these female characters.¹²⁶ Instead, they must locate themselves within white-trash space, and specifically within a white-trash home.

The doubled isolation of white-trash homes—at the hands of the middle class and by the insular nature of white-trash “clan” families—confounds attempts to see the empowering potential of white-trash texts. And yet, the texts I have studied here each offer a figure who attempts to move beyond the confining borders both of their literal domestic space and also of the psychic, shame-filled space of the white-trash figure. Moreover, the very existence of white-trash texts proves the lie of suburbia as *the* figure of the home in the United States. Though the end of *Winter’s Bone* sees Ree as thoroughly entrenched in her domestic space as she was at the beginning of the film, she has achieved a measure of ownership over it, and in so doing, has stripped away some of the stigma and shame of her class. By the end of the film, Ree is able to achieve what Earlene, Anney, and Bone cannot when she rejects her limited female role in order to save the traditional female space of home.

¹²⁶ It seems significant that white trash women rarely escape their class limitations, but figures of white trash men who succeed financially are fairly common in popular culture. In fact, there is an entire counter-myth of trash that portrays the working-class male hero as someone whose talents (boxing usually), intellect (think *Good Will Hunting*), or willingness to break the law (in such films as *The Town*) lead to financial gain and, often, a change of location.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: PERPETUAL MOTION: DOMESTICITY IN

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

In the leaden evening he stood leaning with his elbows on the cart handle and looking across the fields at a house perhaps a mile away. It was the boy who had seen it. Shifting in and out of the curtain of soot like a house in some uncertain dream.
— Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

In his classic 1964 text *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard examines the ways in which the intimate spaces of houses work to create our sense of self, our memories of childhood, and our understanding of how to live in the world. Considering houses as actual, concrete realities, as well as the image and ideology of homes, Bachelard argues that “the chief benefit of the house” is that “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the notion of a house as a protected space, as a refuge, or as an unmediated reflection of self has long been called into question, with recent texts testing the merit of these suppositions and proposing alternative, if not always reassuring, understandings of home in the second half of the twentieth century. The recent housing crisis in particular has altered the way that we understand houses and homes and has revealed that buying a home is no longer, if it ever was, a risk-free endeavor. Neither is it a move toward permanence and community building in the way it appeared to be in the first half of the twentieth century. But despite the instability of the housing market and subsequent shifts in our beliefs about who can, should, and does

own a home, as well as what homes are for (how they impact our emotional, financial, class, and family lives), we still long for home as much as we ever did. In fact, I would argue that our desire for a space of permanence, connection, and community, even a place to dream, is as strong now as it has ever been, perhaps stronger.

Throughout this dissertation, my aim has been to illustrate the ways in which traditional conceptions of domestic spaces and practices have been expanded upon in recent literature and film. Primarily, I have focused on female entrapment within the home—both as a spatial and an emotional/psychic entity. Beginning with suburbia, as the most recognizable of American domestic environs, I argued that such spaces establish a climate of surveillance and behavior modification that is so ingrained as to become status-quo. The middle-class domestic norms associated with suburbia are thus created and perpetuated from within. Therefore, when women break from suburban expectations that dictate their actions as well as their desires, they do so in spectacular ways, often using their bodies as sites of paradigm-shaking, visual protest. Chapter III shifted to a discussion of movement as a way to reconfigure understandings of domesticity as bound to a physical space. In examining the ways in which movement is tied to expanded opportunities for women but also to increased surveillance and a lack of stability, the novels in Chapter III most fully explore the emotional pull of home as a space that *ought to* be safe, secure, well-appointed, and supportive of those who dwell within it. Chapter IV focused on domestic situations that are the furthest from the myth of the middle-class home and illustrate that distance through their failure to maintain aesthetic or behavioral norms required for admittance to the middle class. The texts I

examined in each chapter suggest the variety of ways in which authors and filmmakers have imagined domestic reorganization and explored the dangers, particularly to women, of reimagining home. In every case, even when the characters clearly strive to break free of the limiting definitions of the middle-class home, the myth of home remains a powerful force determining not only one's ability to establish a "proper" home, but also the emotional effect of success or failure.

This dissertation has taken as its guide the assertion that home is something that we, as Americans at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, both long for and, almost pathologically, move away from, and that we, above all, struggle to define our relationship to. It has not been my goal to argue for a way out of this situation, but rather to draw attention to the hold that home still has over us, even in these days of mortgage crisis which has caused us to redefine homes as houses, and houses as things to decorate, "flip," sell, or "walk away from." I further argue that the pull of home seems to be reasserting itself in unusual and, on outward appearance, greatly divergent ways. In this chapter, I move forward to the present moment in American literature and look at the ways that homes are represented in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006).¹²⁷ This novel is particularly interesting in the way that it reveals America's anxieties about home and its role in our lives combined with fears about the future of the world and humanity's place—in terms of a literal, physical space we will occupy, and a figurative, psychological concept—within that world.

¹²⁷ *The Road* is part of a trend of post-apocalyptic and dystopic texts produced in the past decade such as *Children of Men*, *The Walking Dead*, *I Am Legend*, and *The Book of Eli*. The apocalyptic disasters vary in these texts but most typically include plague and nuclear war.

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to intervene in the binary way of thinking that establishes home in opposition to mobility and thus maintains the limits of appropriate ways of establishing and enacting domesticity along gender and class lines.¹²⁸ *The Road* takes these ideas to their extreme by imagining home as a purely nostalgic ideal and mobility as a necessity and a means of security and safety.

While the production of post-apocalyptic literature and film has been significant in the past five to ten years, it is not a new phenomenon in American culture. A great many post-apocalyptic texts, as well as similarly-themed dystopian texts, were produced in the middle of the twentieth century and tended to reveal anxieties about Communism, invasion, and destruction by nuclear bombs. Many of these texts are set in future worlds in which houses are routinely portrayed as automated and devoid of warmth. Just as many of the homes throughout this dissertation have, at moments, seemed to be perpetrators of violence and inciters of madness, the houses in mid-century post-apocalyptic texts act as failed agents of protection, or, in many cases, as agents of destruction. Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" is a good example of this. In this short story, set in 2026, a family has been killed in a nuclear attack, but their house, the only thing standing in the whole town, continues to go about its automated routine even after the inhabitants are dead. The house is made up of a collection of robots that cook food and act as butler and caretaker for its owners. The robots clean up crumbs, mud, and eventually the body of the deceased family dog. But the robots' automated

¹²⁸ Gender and class are upended in this novel. In a world in which money and organized economies no longer exist, class cannot function as it once did and is replaced by a more Darwinian survivalist model. There are a few moments in the novel that indicate that people are still relegated to various "class" positions through hierarchal systems such as slavery. These systems, however, appear to be the minority and most people congregate in very small groups, surviving by scavenging.

sing-song reminders to wear a raincoat, or soft admonitions that time is wasting and the family should be “*off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one!*” reveal to the reader that the house is not the reliable, comforting member of the family that it purports to be. Although it continues about its work in the face of destruction and death, the house has failed to provide shelter or comfort. It becomes a parody of itself as it reads poetry to empty rooms and cooks food that no one will eat. The absurdity of maintaining the ritual of meals and housekeeping decides the house’s fate since, after a branch falls through a window, knocking a bottle of cleaner onto the stove and starting a fire, the house does not have enough water in its supplies to put itself out. It has used up all of the water washing dishes and making coffee.¹²⁹ No amount of rigid adherence to routine, or surveillance of potential invaders can help the house now and it dies while it “tried to save itself” (254). In the description of the house’s death, the reader finds echoes of the human deaths that occur before the narrative begins. As the fire ravages, “the house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air” (254-255). This fearsome vision of a society, so controlled by automation as to be unaware of the extinction of humanity, finds its power by representing our most cherished space—the home—as also the most indifferent and incapable of keeping us secure.

¹²⁹ An animated version of the story, produced by Budet Laskovyj Dozhd, makes the house even more self-destructive. When a bird flies in through a hole in the wall of the house, the main robot that controls the house demands a password from the bird. When no password is forthcoming, the house attempts to kill the intruder and manages instead to slam itself into walls and mortally “wound” itself.

The post-apocalyptic texts being produced now are less likely to be set far in the future, the authors preferring instead to imagine what the world would look like if an apocalyptic disaster happened tomorrow. These works draw on the anxieties that are evident in mid-century post-apocalyptic texts and combine them with general concerns about the security and stability of houses, society, and the environment in the current moment. As the middle-class continues to lose its lock on the American Dream, most profoundly represented as the inability to own a home, literature and film increasingly produces narratives in which houses fail to shield us from crisis. Therefore, in texts such as *The Road* domestic spaces are frightening not because their technology has alienated and ultimately failed humanity, but because humanity must leave conventional home spaces or meet their doom.¹³⁰ As with all of the texts in this study, domestic space is paradoxical in this novel, functioning as both a source of desire and fear. Unlike the texts in the previous chapters of this dissertation, however, maintaining stable and fixed home spaces in *The Road* is not only difficult and dangerous, it is impossible. The novel is set an unknown number of years after an indeterminate disaster darkened the skies and slowly killed off the majority of life on Earth.¹³¹ Throughout the novel, the two main characters, known only as the man and the boy, negotiate a scoured landscape on their way south where they hope it will be warmer. In order to survive, the man and the boy

¹³⁰ These texts differ from the similar genre of dystopian literature in their representation of domesticity in that dystopian texts generally focus on the limitations of highly regulated worlds and houses (their protagonists long for a way out) and post-apocalyptic texts focus on the dangers of a world outside of regulations and societal rules (their protagonists long for a way in).

¹³¹ The source of the disaster is never revealed. All the reader knows is that there was “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” that causes the power to go out and the clocks to stop (52). The disaster, or subsequent fires, caused a cloud of ashes to block out the sun and making it impossible for vegetation to grow. The exact number of years since the event is also unknown. The boy’s mother was pregnant with him when it happened, but the boy’s age is never given. It is assumed that he is somewhere between eight and ten years old.

constantly search for food and fuel for their makeshift lamps and nightly campfires. Therefore, even if domesticity is not situated within houses in this text, as convention would dictate, acts of domesticity have not disappeared. In fact, domesticity is centralized through the focus on the characters' domestic acts: procuring and preparing food, seeing to the upkeep of their clothing, and establishing and secure a new space in which to sleep each night. While the man and boy spend many nights out of doors, doing so without the benefit of the tarp that the man uses for a lean-to would likely kill them. The man must make a space, not just a campfire, in order to keep the boy emotionally and physically secure. The tarp that protects the man and boy from the worst of the elements acts as a kind of home, but a meager one, and one which gains its ability to protect primarily from its portability. In a world in which supplies are low and bands of cannibals hunt for human beings, survival requires constant movement.

What is particularly striking about the mobile domesticity in this novel, especially as compared to the other texts in this dissertation, is that it is maintained in the absence of women. Although there is nothing new about suggesting that men might do housework in situations that lack women—westerns are full of atypical and gender neutral “housekeeping”—it is rarely so specifically about the upkeep of domestic space and family. Moreover, McCarthy presents the women that do appear in the text—the boy's mother in flashback, impregnated women whose infants will be used for food—as having utterly failed at motherhood. Families, and particularly mothers, are so lacking in the text that the man and the boy stand as the only real example of family until the novel's end.

Women are bound to the ideals of domesticity in problematic ways in this novel. As with the other texts in this dissertation, domestic spaces are understood as the primary locations of women. Assumptions about women's domestic duties and proclivities are undermined in *The Road* because women are reduced to purely sexual beings primarily responsible for producing children. While assigning women the task of carrying and raising children is certainly typical, many of the women in this novel are treated as livestock, giving birth to infants that will then be used for food. The one woman that we hear from directly, the man's wife and boy's mother, enacts a kind of rebellion of her position by walking into the darkness and killing herself. She is no longer willing to live in fear of the day when marauders will "rape [them] and kill [them] and eat [them]" and wishes that she could take the boy into death with her (56). When the man tries to stop her from leaving by saying that she will not be able to see where she is going, she states that she does not need to see. While the act of leaving the family unit and choosing her own destiny is a radical one, and one which she claims ownership over and is proud of, it is also enacted in isolation and without witness. Unlike the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* or Helen in *Housekeeping*, the woman is denied visibility when she goes into the darkness to slit her wrists with "a flake of obsidian" (58).¹³² Her act, rather than functioning as a radical and expansive moment in the text as other moments of embodied protest have the potential to do, heralds the impending doom of the family.

¹³² Although the woman commits this act in direct defiance of her husband and son's wishes, she is portrayed as troublingly cowardly in the way that she refuses to say goodbye to her son. The fact that she uses a method that the man taught her further reduces the power of her final action.

In a novel in which domesticity has become mobile, and in which “home” is defined as that which you carry with you and those with whom you share a fire, the woman might be thought to be a bastardization of the home ethos. When the woman flees the space of home, figured for her as her family and their mobile and dangerous life, she highlights the myth of women as angels and mothers as always self-sacrificing. While the portrayal of women in the novel points toward the ultimate fantasy of the removal of women in favor of all-male families, the world without women is no fantasy at all. The boy loses hope and repeatedly states his desire to be with his mother in death, and the man views his dreams of his wife as poisonous temptations calling him to a previous world. Although the other texts in this study set out to undo myths involving women and proper domesticity by focusing on the myths’ damaging power or by suggesting alternative modes of domesticity, McCarthy does not take up this project, but neither does he present an entirely misogynistic world-view. Women may be demonized in this text when they leave their families or eat their children, but they are no worse than men. Ultimately, McCarthy’s representation of women is tied to his broader interests in representing longing for home. Rather than suggesting that the world might be a better place without women in it, the novel presents the ultimate nostalgia for nostalgia. The longing here, as in so many of the texts in this study, is not for the absent mother as she actually was, but for the idea of women as self-sacrificing, nurturing mothers and wives whose presence would establish domestic harmony. While this myth was undone long ago, nothing has come to take its place and, as such, this novel seems to suggest, we are doomed to long for it in perpetuity.

By relegating the woman to the past tense and to memory, McCarthy centers the narrative on the man and the boy and their actions. As much as the woman haunts the world of the text, it is the man and the boy who inhabit it and who attempt to maintain domestic normalcy in the face of demoralization and mortal danger. As the man and boy move about the dismal landscape, hampered in their progress to the East Coast of the United States by the shortening days and increasing snow and cold, the shopping cart in which they carry all of their possessions takes on great significance. The cart is mobile and useful because of its wheels and the fact that it allows the man and the boy to travel with more supplies than they could otherwise carry. It holds the tarp and blankets that make their evening camp and bed, the cans of food from which they eat, the fuel that powers their lamp, and the toys that once kept the boy entertained and in good spirits. But the cart is also a burden. The man and boy must hide it when they hear people coming on the road, and pushing it up snowy mountain passes eventually becomes more than the man can manage. Just as any house would do, the cart holds the essentials for life, but it also weighs its owners down with its collection of things unused, unneeded, and forgotten. On one occasion, when the man has to unload the cart in order to carry it over a tree that has fallen in the road, the boy discovers toys at the bottom of the heap that he had forgotten about. Like someone going through boxes of childhood playthings in an attic, the boy is initially excited to find a yellow truck, and puts it in a place of honor on top of the cart where it rides for a while. Ultimately, though, the toy loses its appeal, no longer having the power to take his mind off the realities of his situation. Things that would be so commonplace in a typical home, such as blankets, cookware,

and clothing, become highly sought after luxuries, and non-essentials, even once-loved toys, become just things to carry and slow you down.

Despite their focus on the basic stuff of life—food, fuel, shelter, clothes—the man and the boy have to constantly replenish their supplies. They are always on the edge of starvation and the man suffers from a chronic cough that wakes him in the night and depletes his strength. Therefore, they are often forced to take frightening risks to find food. Sometimes they are lucky enough to find their supplies in gas stations or in the littered and long-since-plundered aisles of grocery stores. Though these structures do exist and work in interesting ways in the novel,¹³³ the spaces of greatest emotional turmoil are houses and other domestic spaces. Three of the domestic spaces that they enter, the boyhood home, the bad house,¹³⁴ and the bunker, prove to be especially dangerous, although some of them initially appear to be their salvation. The first of these spaces, the boyhood home, is dangerous because it threatens to pull the man away from his real duties to the boy. Early in the novel, the man and the boy stumble upon the house in which the man lived when he was a child. Although the boy is typically anxious about going into unknown spaces, he seems unreasonably frightened of this house. He tells the man that he is afraid that “there could be somebody” in the house and urges him to move on without going in the house. But the man does go in and the boy finds himself

¹³³ In addition to its focus on domesticity specifically, *The Road* also represents a world stripped of consumer culture and the pleasures and dangers tied to such a culture. While there is an implicit argument in the novel that human greed and the need to consume might lead to its own destruction, McCarthy also plays with the reality that consumer culture affords many pleasures that would not otherwise exist. In a particularly poignant scene, the man finds a can of Coca-Cola in a vending machine and gives it to the boy. It is something the boy has never seen before. It is a magical thing. And there is every reason to believe that he will never see another one.

¹³⁴ This is my term.

threatened by something more dangerous than marauders or cannibals. Rather, he sees his father moving away from him and into the life that he used to live:

He [the man] stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of the yard. A tangle of dead lilac. The shape of a hedge. On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn't.

(26)

As the man falls further into his memories, he thinks about the rituals that used to make the house a home, and that tied him to his family. The boy's fears are different from what they would be in another house. He does not fear invasion or death, but rather abandonment.

The second and third domestic spaces, respectively, signify the complete degradation of warmth and security that a home is meant to provide, and the pinnacle of such safety. The man and the boy go to the second house on a day that finds them perilously close to death and, thus, unable to assess danger as well as they otherwise might. They misread or ignore a series of clues that indicate that the house they have found, and the locked cellar within, do not hold the supplies they so desperately need. Instead, they discover that the inhabitants of the house are keeping people in the cellar,

naked and in total darkness, and are eating them piece by piece. Domestic space has been turned on its end in this house. The clothes and blankets piled in the living room signal degradation and death rather than warmth and comfort. The huge kettle in the back yard, once used for rendering hogs at fall harvest time, is now used for more grisly meals. This house, like the boyhood home, will destroy the man and the boy if they stay in it for too long.

The final domestic space is the most troubling in that it initially appears to be an answer to the man and boy's prayers. The man and boy come across the bunker by accident, and the boy is initially afraid to go inside because they have to access it, much like the cellar in the bad house, by prying up and then crawling through a door in the ground. The man assures the boy that the "door looks like the other door, [...] But it's not" (137). And when they find "everything" they need inside, it seems that the man is right. The man and boy spend a few peaceful days in the bunker, eating their fill of food that the boy has never seen before, sleeping on comfortable beds, and even heating water so they can bathe in the adjacent house's bathtub. The boy doubts that the things they have found, "the richness of a vanished world," are "real" and is at first unable to allow himself the pleasure of such luck. Ultimately, though, his desire to stay in the bunker, to live off the food and comfort within it, is the biggest danger of all. This space of domestic comfort, the only one the man and boy have known together, threatens their ability to live in the real world of post-apocalyptic want and suffering because, as the man reflects, "he could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well" (154). The boy already feels some of that loss when it

comes time to leave the bunker and head back to their long, cold days of walking. This space will catch and hold the boy the way that the childhood home had trapped the man if they do not leave it. In its way the bunker is as dangerous to them as the bad house was since they would have willingly given up on life in order to stay in it. When they leave the bunker, the man and boy choose to keep moving. In this novel, life is impossible if held to one place.

The perpetual leaving and remaking of domestic spaces at work in *The Road*, and in all of the texts in this dissertation, speaks to our hyper-mobile society and suggests that the only hope for the future is to recognize and discard the comforts and false security of traditional domesticity in favor of a more meager, fluid, mobile homemaking. Yet mobility—understood throughout this dissertation as a literal endeavor to take home on the road and a metaphorical longing to collapse binaries in search of more permeable boundaries between inside and out, stasis and movement, and security and freedom—is often presented as uniquely problematic for women. Whether women attempt merely to establish a more flexible means of housekeeping, thrust off traditional domesticity entirely by becoming tramps, or struggle to maintain domesticity from marginalized, working-class and white trash positions, they are equally stigmatized for their disregard of conventions. As long as the female body and the domestic sphere are understood as aspects of the same conservative ideology, both equally prone to surveillance and regulation, home will remain a paradox: an idealized place and idea that we long to find, and a confining space from which we long to flee. The longing for home evident in the texts suggests that we desire stability, but also that the idea of home as safe and stable

has always been a dangerous myth. The significance of these works in the present moment can be found in the ways that they so profoundly showcase the paradox of our desires for home and our desires for freedom from home.

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