

Uneasy Assembly:
Unsettling Home in Early Twentieth-Century American Cultural Production

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Introduction

“Come Right In”: Situating Narratives of Domicility

“If the American people ever allow private banks to control the issue of their currency, first by inflation, then by deflation, the banks and corporations that will grow up around them will deprive the people of all property until their children wake homeless on the continent their Fathers conquered...” -Attributed to Thomas Jefferson

It wouldn't seem that Jurgis Rudkus, the poor immigrant protagonist of Upton Sinclair's muck-raking tale *The Jungle*, would have much in common with Jackie and David Siegel, the billionaire subjects of the recent documentary *The Queen of Versailles*, which tracks their efforts to build the largest private residence in the United States. And in most ways, he doesn't. While the Siegels agonize over whether the financial crisis will snatch from their bejeweled hands the partially-built dream house with its 35 bathrooms and special deck for viewing the nightly Disney fireworks, Jurgis and his family fight quite literally to survive in the trenches of poverty and prejudice. There is, however, a thru-line between Jurgis' struggle and the Siegels' perhaps more dubious travails. While *The Jungle* is better known for its indictment of working conditions and food quality in Chicago's meat-packing industry, it also traces the Rudkus family's encounter with a housing scam. When they first arrive in the neighborhood where they'll live, someone hands them a pamphlet with the image of a proto-suburban dream house and the phrase “Home Sweet Home” written in several languages. Despite their fears of getting swindled, they purchase a house and do indeed thus entangle themselves in a predatory scheme that puts them in deeper and deeper debt until one day Jurgis comes home to find the house repainted and his own family gone, as if they “had been wiped out of existence; as if they were proving to be dream people, who never had existed at all” (204).

Though the people have only been displaced as of this moment, their dream of home has indeed been wiped out of existence, and the loss of the material structure precipitates the family's ultimate disintegration. Earlier in the process, much of the anxiety over the housing

scam had been crystallized in an argument over the deed, in which the agent confirmed that now that the deed was signed, there was no escape from its terms. This notion of the housing “deed” distills, I would argue, the Rudkus family’s larger dilemmas as well as the Siegel family’s attitude toward their own domestic dwelling possibilities in the face of national economic crisis. And it ties them both to national narratives of self-making through home-owning. Jurgis is poised at the precipice of the “American Dream,” an immigrant homeowner working his way to prosperity. The Siegels represent that dream on steroids. They are presented as having shot up from modest origins to the social and financial heights. In their case as with the Rudkus’, a “Home Sweet Home” crystallizes their hoped-for success, and the loss of it registers their potential downfall.

Also, in each case there is an ongoing tension between the individual and the system, the agent and the machine. The thing at stake in each case, in a sense, is the hinged meaning of the word “deed” itself. The word corrals the meanings of individual action and ownership of the material framework in which one might ideally take refuge from the toils and trials of the world. The question this word raises—particularly in *The Jungle*’s dramatization of it as the thing that seals the family’s fate—is whether one’s actions are the path to success, as the American Dream promises, or whether one’s fate is determined, locked into some sort of contract, by a pre-existing set of structures one cannot change once one buys in to the dream of home. Both Jurgis and the Siegels have bought in, and both have found it disturbingly tenuous, likely to dissolve at any moment into the ultimate estrangement represented by the loss of a home. Of course, the consequences are quite different in each case, and not only because one is fictional. Jurgis plunges into deeper pain and struggle with the loss of his house, losing loved ones and falling to the fringes of society. The Siegels must fire several nannies and learn to feed their own pets.

Also, since the movie premiered to much acclaim, the pendulum has swung for the Siegels again. Construction on Versailles has resumed, and David Siegel is suing the filmmaker for libel.

Many in the U.S. housing market haven't been so lucky, however, and they too are real people facing the real consequences of having their dream domestic lives wiped out of existence. Or even just of realizing that the myth of homeownership as a surefire path to personal fulfillment and success is just that. While the stories of the Rudkus and the Siegel families differ in plenty of ways, they illustrate a continuum of investment in a dream of the material home as the key to success, the union of "deed" and "deed" where the act of securing a proper domicile secures, in turn, enduring and unshakeable access to the comforts of belonging and security associated with being propertied. Their stories, each media sensations in their own way, also illustrate the persistent cultural interest in narratives of dream houses and home dreams, narratives of engagement for better or worse with the domestic ideals promoted by any number of people from the lowliest of scammers to the most earnest of elected officials.

In June of 2012, NPR ran a story online describing the feeling shared by many Millennial Generation Americans: that homeownership is still the ultimate goal, but most likely for them an unattainable one (Neuman). The essay's sense that Generation Y remains perhaps hopelessly devoted to homeownership is not merely an impression; a survey by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars had recently confirmed that the overwhelming majority of Americans continued to consider homeownership personally important, a national priority, and an important part of the American Dream ("New National Poll"). All this despite a burst housing bubble and the concern that, as Kathleen Madigan states in a Wall Street Journal MarketWatch essay several months after the NPR piece, "The housing mess is much like William Faulkner's past: It is not dead; it's not even past." The anxiety produced by this confluence of desire for

domestic stability and the ongoing reality of an unstable domestic economy is neatly expressed in the first response in the comment thread at the end of the NPR piece. As both assessment of the present and warning of worse to come, the commenter offers an extended version of the quote that serves as an epigraph above. Along with the analogy to Faulkner, this recent commentary on the housing situation alerts us to the degree to which the present crisis intersects with questions of historical narrative and narrative history as well as the usual questions about Fannie Mae, Freddy Mac, and just what exactly constitutes a “‘safe’ toxic mortgage.”

The Jefferson quotation has been printed in various places since 1937, a year when even more Americans had reason to consider domestic and financial stability unattainable. It was also, incidentally, the year after Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!*, a text very much concerned with the interaction between the private home and the balance of national and/or economic powers. It is worth noting about the Jefferson quotation, however, that Jefferson never actually said it (“Private Banks”).¹ Still, the quote’s prevalence is all the more striking for its spuriousness, as it reveals the degree to which the cultural imagination seizes on narratives with or without factual basis, whether out of hope, fear, or appreciation of a good story. In this case, we glimpse a larger narrative about the nature and purpose of homeownership in American culture, the centrality of that narrative to American culture, and the national—indeed the global—politics that underwrite both the cultural narrative of homeownership and the material conditions of American homes themselves.

Perhaps most striking is “Jefferson’s” association of competing types of privacy and entitlement. The specter of these children waking homeless suggests that such a happening would reverse some natural, previously secure state of having or being at home, of being propertied. The children’s private security, in this case, is threatened by the “private banks”

whose control of the economy pits the citizen's private wellbeing against the private interests that drive the public sector. It also sets up a paradigm in which financial, corporate, or industrial greed are not features of the dangerous, dark world outside the safe and comfortable home but rather that the safety and comfort of the home are contingent upon moderation and ethical practice in the business world. Fear of homelessness, in this paradigm, *is* fear of an imbalance of economic power and all the politics that structure it. And thus the home is an expression of rather than an escape from such politics, despite a century or so between Jefferson and Faulkner of interest in constructing the two realms as separate.

Whether thinking of the above quotation as Jefferson's words or as later imaginations of Jeffersonian sentiment, it is equally notable that the association of domestic and financial private interests is infused as well with imperial politics. "Jefferson" fears the children will be turned out of homes they've been able to live in because "their Fathers conquered" the continent where such homes were then built. The private home, in this equation, is unabashedly the spoil of empire to which the average citizen, assumed to be the child of the Fathers in question, is entitled. But of course the sentiment raises some questions. Where are the Mothers in all this, for instance? And what have the housing options been throughout this time for those who *weren't* fathered by the conquering "Fathers" and their ilk? Perhaps more intriguing still, what sorts of homes have been possible for those who *were* but without being acknowledged as such? Again Madigan's MarketWatch reference to Faulkner is canny, for much of his writing centers on the question of how such tangled and largely suppressed genealogies have structured "private" domestic life as well as the national family constituted by such individual units.

In the "Jeffersonian" quotation—and, more intricately, in Faulkner's literary homes—we encounter a (selectively) nativist construction of the continent as the rightful home of the

children of conquerors who must now be protected from the next wave of conquerors. This construction seems at once anachronistic and timely. In fact, by deploying this sentiment in response to the modern-day housing market, the comment signals a remarkably Faulknerian nostalgia for an imagined past of Jeffersonian domestic tranquility and order, both within the family and on a national scale. I would suggest that this nostalgia both continues to inform American housing ideals and newly registers the imperial and otherwise exploitative dynamics that have long been built into the foundations of the American dream home. At the same time, the MarketWatch reference to Faulkner's view of history as ever-present reminds us that domestic disarray whether on a personal or national scale is nothing new, and further, that a "housing mess" of one kind or another has been central to both national and literary history on this continent at least since the Fathers came a-conquering. Indeed, the adaptation of Faulkner's famous comment to describe recent housing dilemmas incisively figures the present economic crisis as another episode in a long history of domestic life as always already fraught with one kind of trouble or another. Furthermore, it weaves the present politics of housing, appropriately enough, into Faulkner's vision of an unshakeable, living history of inter-racial violence and intimacy that has long infused "private"-domestic and national-domestic politics alike. In Faulkner's work, these dynamics often manifest in the day-to-day life of the individual household with its intertwined racial bloodlines, histories, and possible futures. Jefferson, of course, was also well acquainted with such phenomena.

Suggestive as they are, the NPR and MarketWatch pieces discussed above are only a drop in the sea of the current housing and homeownership discourse, not to mention an array of overlapping concerns. From controversies over gay marriage and the definition of the American family, to proliferating shelter magazines and the rampant popularity of reality shows about

dream homes, it is as clear as ever that the way we think of ourselves and our nation is thoroughly tied up in the way we think of our homes and the social forms that sustain them. This is perhaps most evident in the ongoing commitment to owning a certain kind of home as a sign of self-realization and national belonging despite economic uncertainty and periodic arguments for shifting focus to the benefits of renting and the possibilities for rethinking both the material and social composition of the ideal living space. This project illuminates the underpinnings of such domestic investments, focusing on early 20th-century developments such as the rise of mass-production, new possibilities in the mobilization of domestic space, and a period of unprecedentedly direct state involvement in promoting ownership of the single-family suburban home as an expression of citizenship. These and other phenomena I will discuss, which continue to shape attitudes about home occupancy today, are prominent in early 20th-century popular and print culture, and I contend that their influence obliquely but importantly infuses much literary production in this time period as well. Reading such texts against each other, this project examines how an array of literary and cultural works operate in relation to this critical moment in an evolving American mythology of idealized relations between housing and subjectivity.

Certainly, there has been no shortage of scholarly attention to conceptions of the American home—from Jefferson's republic, to the imperialized parlors of sentimental fiction, to the proliferating domesticities of contemporary urban and suburban life. And indeed, there is no shortage of criticism examining discrete examples of domestic space, or metaphors thereof, as important to particular narratives. However, for all of this scrutiny, much work remains in relating such examples to each other and to a broader discourse on home and housing, as well as to established categories of criticism. While more work is tending this way, scholarship still does not sufficiently account for the fact that domestic space and practice continues to be a pervasive

concern in American literature well beyond what is generally understood as the 19th-century genre of “domestic fiction.” Contributing to efforts to fill such gaps, this project interrogates literary constructions of home in the early 20th century, offering sustained readings of works by Djuna Barnes, William Faulkner, Claude McKay, and Bessie Smith that place them in conversation with an array of other cultural materials related to developments in housing construction and ideology, technologies of mobility, and the large-scale demographic shifts of immigration and the Great Migration, all of which factors have importantly shaped definitions of ideal American domestic life.

These primary works, along with others I consider, span the critical categories of American modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, and popular culture, as well as varying a great deal in formal approach and ideological intent. I argue, however, that they correspond in representing a kind of domestic disarrangement that signifies with similar effect against a shared backdrop of various cultural drives toward the consolidation of the normative American household, or what I think of as *domestic standardization*. Though these authors and artists do not always explicitly address the cultural factors I read them against, they represent attitudes of resistance and assertions of variety that both show the other side of drives toward standardization and, most importantly, denaturalize the constructed history of notions of stable, socially uniform, home-owning citizenship that have come to be seen as natural, inevitable, and traditional.

These texts share a politics of spatial engagement that calls into question naturalized relations between individual subjects and the spaces they inhabit. They do this by directing attention to the home as a material space and to the ways in which individuals interact with or are positioned in relation to that space. In various ways, these texts dismantle conventional household relations, both in regards to the social structures of home and family that are culturally

sanctioned, and in regards to the ways in which certain types of domestic spaces are expected to signify as frameworks for comfort, security, love, acceptance, success, and so on. Instead of corroborating domestic ideals being promoted by political and social organizations, these works undermine the logic of associating the commonly idealized material domestic space—the owner-occupied single-family suburban home—with perfected belonging in identity networks of various sorts, from family to nation.

Though with varied approaches, they similarly perform this cultural work by presenting domestic spaces and practices that destabilize family life and/or re-frame the model home as an arbitrary construction that neither accurately reflects American life nor offers a sufficient blueprint for well-being. In many regards, they raise familiar questions about the nature and performance of domesticity. This project contends, however, that the texts studied here, among others, engage with domestic space in ways that our readings of “domesticity” do not fully address. While many discussions of literary domestic spaces address issues of materiality, identity, and practice through interrogations of “domesticity,” I offer the term “domecility” as a more neutral way of identifying the relationship itself between individuals and the domestic spaces they interact with.

The term “domesticity” refers primarily to the home as an *ideological* space with very specific connotations of gender and privacy. These connotations also underlie Habermasian constructions of the “domestic sphere” that oppose it to a “public sphere” defined by market relations, constructions which in turn structure many literary readings of domestic subjects. Although critics regularly and profitably deconstruct concepts of the separate, private domestic sphere and of domesticity itself, readings of domestic space and practice must always work out of this entrenched paradigm. The term “domecility,” by contrast, allows us to focus on the

literary home as a *material* space, by no means ignoring the gender politics we associate with “domesticity” but beginning instead with questions about how people materially construct, arrange, experience, and relate to their homes. It begins with the material site of the home and then asks rather than assumes which ideologies, social factors, and/or cultural and historical contexts most importantly play into reading it. Above all, it allows us to see what the material, lived experience of the space might contribute to its narrative significance.

The term “domecility” is, in a sense, diagnostic rather than descriptive, a container rather than a set of connotations. It is based on the idea that material conditions, needs, practices, and particularities constitute the space of home as surely as do social relations—indeed, that such material particularities can shape the social relations that are so often understood to define the home. And thus, that much can be gained by taking a step back to examine and historicize the material space rather than take for granted its features and significance. One must ask what sort(s) of domecility a text portrays, promotes, or protests, and one could examine domecility in any text from any time period that concerns the home and/or domestic space and practice. Approaching literary homes from this angle facilitates grounded readings of literary space by prioritizing the historical contexts of the spaces represented. It also enriches our understanding of the literary space of the home by foregrounding the material dimensions of domestic life that are often either submerged in texts or glossed over in critical readings thereof, whether because critics fail to note the material contexts that contemporary readers would have been familiar with, or because they continue to see aesthetic value as antithetical to serious consideration of the mundane, material concerns of domestic life.

The texts studied here actively draw attention to such concerns, and thus to constructions of domecility. One vital thing they have in common, in doing so, is that they explore spatial as

well as social constructions of belonging, by which I mean that they bring to the forefront the question of how the lived experience and material particularity of domestic spaces shapes one's relationship to social frameworks such as identity and community, or to put it slightly differently, of the ways in which one interacts with those spaces. Along similar lines, these texts draw attention to how such relations are affected by the economic, architectural, and technological fashioning of the varied material spaces we call home. By foregrounding questions of how spatial features can define and express domestic experience, they denaturalize received social forms of the most intimate order. They call into question what it means, for better or worse, if it is not an identity marker but one's relation to a certain space (i.e. currently inhabiting it, owner of it, forbidden to enter it, standing outside the bedroom door) that shapes one's experience of positioning in a family, in a racial category, in a civic body, or, as the case may be, outside it.

The implications of such a question are more easily recognizable on a broader geographical scale. Consider, for instance, Cecile Richards' recent comment on NPR regarding state legislation of women's reproductive rights: "it is outrageous that politicians would go after women in this way...it's very discouraging to think that somehow, women's rights in this country are now dependent on their ZIP code" (Lohr). Outrageous indeed, but of course it is nothing new for rights to be geographically determined. Spatial location could utterly transform the experience of identity for a "fugitive slave" in the antebellum south, for instance, or rather, if that same person were displaced a few hundred (or even just a few) miles, for a "free black" in the antebellum north. Location can transform one's relation to the law and its agents, to social status, to racial identification, to the likely implications of one's gender position. In a different place, one can be a different person—or at least, the implications of being the person one is can change radically.

As suggested by the texts I examine in this study, such spatial contingencies operate on smaller scales as well. In regards to how one identifies with—or is identified by—other individuals or communities, what does it mean to enter or leave a neighborhood? Or a house? A room? To build or rent or own or lose access to a space in which to live? To inhabit that space with others, or alone? To fill it with sound or empty it of furniture? To make it out of wood or metal? To settle into it, or pass through it, or remember it, or be replaced by others who wish to occupy it? And how do such questions matter in early 20th-century narratives? By highlighting the experience of different spaces and the way one's relationship to those spaces can affect constructions of identity and belonging, these texts unpack and defamiliarize what seem like the inherent meanings of being connected to a space (or not, as the case may be) in a given way. Such questions have broad implications for various processes of identity- and community-formation. Not least of which is that, as the citizen-family-household has long been considered an essential building block of the nation, these narratives of domestic variety and instability call us to re-think not only how we organize our homes, but how we organize our society.

As the following chapters contend, the full import of these narratives of socio-spatial domestic positioning—or rather, of domesticity—becomes clear when we read them against their contemporary cultural discourse about home and housing. In order to highlight both the implications of very specific cultural contexts and the breadth of their significance for literary history, I've composed a series of chapters that each pair sustained readings of varied key texts with relevant cultural phenomena. Both the texts and the cultural instances represent a chronological range from the turn of the century through the mid-1930s, a time in which a certain ethos of domestic standardization came into focus. As Jeffrey Hornstein points out, real estate brokerage came into its own as a profession during this span as part of an effort to

rehabilitate real estate as a commodity after the depression of the 1890s. With the rising profession came a large-scale effort to market the American Dream to an expanding middle-class through the sale of idealized homes, and ultimately, Hornstein argues, to market the idea of middle-class identity itself. Though the Great Depression, the New Deal, and WWII would soon change the terms of characterizing and constructing domestic space, these inter-depression years represent a time of electrifying expansion in the economy and the related sense of social and economic possibility for individuals. That very sense of expanding possibility, meanwhile, can also be understood as instability building towards catastrophic economic collapse. My study focuses on this time span in order to examine how the housing bubble developing during this time enriches our understanding of literary production then and literary history now, not to mention our own recent experience with expansion and collapse in an unstable housing market. Rather than moving chronologically, the chapters range back and forth in this period in order to emphasize the degree to which conceptions of ideal domesticity are constantly complicated by looking back at received models of domestic success and forward at feared or desired possibilities for how the domestic space and self might transform.

My first chapter, “A Solid American Space: From Domestic Standardization to Dilemmatic Democracy,” begins the larger discussion by identifying the domestic ideal I contend lurks in the background of all the texts discussed in this study. This section traces the discourse of domestic standardization through a number of its aspects most salient to this study, examining in particular developing ideals of homeownership, the relationship between those ideals and the ideologies of Taylorism and Fordism, and the ways in which the material mass-production of home spaces and furnishings reified the conceptual domestic ideal. The intersection of such technology with home spaces, furthermore, is essential to a notion of

domestic space as potentially democratic. The remainder of the chapter establishes a framework for reading the socio-spatial politics of the readings that follow by putting Philip Fisher's notion of democratic social space into conversation with Bonnie Honig's discussion of "dilemmatic democracy," which privileges the reality of conflictual identity over the dangerous dream of the home as refuge. These ideas together create the basis of viewing the home as the space of dilemmatic democracy, insofar as they each offer a vision of "home" as a space constituted by, rather than evacuated of, difference and conflict.

My second chapter, "'Their Only Treason': Domestic Space and National Belonging in Djuna Barnes' *Ryder*," begins the more sustained literary readings by arguing that the text, through its negotiation of material domestic spaces and the personal relations they structure, denaturalizes the state's attempt to standardize the home and family according to a preferred heterosexual, racially un-mixed, monogamous model. Reading the text's domestic arrangements against issues such as immigration, tenement reform, and the changing composition of the national racial and ethnic family, I argue that Barnes invests domestic space with the stakes of national belonging, ethnic inclusion, and civic legitimacy. Though written in the late 1920s, the text stages a family home set a few decades earlier, and I contend that by juxtaposing these temporal settings and their comparative models of ideal relations to domestic space, or domesticity, Barnes highlights the evolution of domestic ideologies in order to defamiliarize contemporary associations of spatial and social meanings. I also offer a way to re-think critical readings that see the text's aesthetic complexity as a function of its biographical valence. While its intricacies have often been dismissed as mere family drama rather than modernist innovation, I re-direct attention to the national family drama, as it were, of cultural narratives about proper domestic life.

The sometimes dismissive critical attitude towards a biographical element, furthermore, takes part in the broader tendency, over the last several decades, to define modernism in opposition to what is seen as the middle-class bourgeois concern of domestic life, a tendency that has also produced a sense of modernism as masculine. More recently, however, a growing number of scholars have worked to dismantle that opposition, arguing that domestic spaces are the spaces of modernism as well. Others, meanwhile, have been calling for closer evaluation of Barnes' in fact complex and powerful aesthetic. Building on these trends, I link Barnes' modernist aesthetic to her emphasis on spatial concerns—such as building materials, crowding, and arrangement of rooms and architectural features. I argue that through this focus she posits an idea of spatial domestic legitimacy that would locate belonging in the space of the household according to the fact of presence rather than the idea of genealogy, thus essentially privileging squatters' rights over nativist, heritage-based notions of citizenship. Her anti-genealogical stance, furthermore, can be read in concert with her aesthetic temporal play, in that she deploys an array of historical literary styles throughout. This meeting of thematic and aesthetic disruption of continuity dismantles ideas of both familial and literary heritage. Instead, it re-frames her aesthetics as not merely chaotic, but rather, as a forceful challenge to masculinist definitions of modernism that are based, in turn, on the legacies of the masculine-leaning canon against which Barnes' work was often judged in her own time and beyond.

Chapter Three, “‘Honor Bilt’: Constructions of Home in *Absalom, Absalom!*”, also takes up the question of how material domestic spaces can express and/or challenge genealogical dynamics. This chapter reconsiders the central project in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* by reading Thomas Sutpen's home-building efforts against the early 20th-century phenomenon of prefabricated home kits. In recent decades, scholars such as Nina Baym, Rosemary Marangoly

George, and Kristin Jacobson have challenged the gendered critical approach to “domestic fiction” that defines it, essentially, by its female authorship and protagonists, and their concern with household happenings. With this view in mind, I consider *Absalom, Absalom!* primarily as a text about home-making, thus taking its focus on the intertwined spatial and social constructions of domestic life as an example of male-centered domestic fiction.

As for the implications of Sutpen’s home-making, though Faulkner’s grand, falling houses have often been read as Gothic, I suggest that we re-consider his domestic destabilizations as a modernist critique of the obfuscations that bolster American founding myths. He challenges here, in particular, the ways in which the plantation house has been used to crystallize the mythology of the noble, fallen South. As in the case of *Ryder*, this text stages a negotiation between the socio-spatial domestic ideals of different eras. Set in the mid-late 1800s, narrated in the early 1900s, and written in the 1930s, it draws attention to the possibilities and the limits, as conceived in these different cultural moments, of transforming the self by transforming the space one lives in. Reading the text’s settings through the dual cultural frames of the kit house phenomenon and the rise of mass-production that made kit houses possible, I argue that upon closer consideration Sutpen’s laborious process stages, ultimately, modern industry’s promise of a united, quick-and-easy building of the ideal self through the ideal house. If we thus read the house as expressing rather than denying the increasing mechanization of American life, we can see how it explores the possibility of seeing not just the material but the social components of the home as interchangeable. Viewed through this Fordist lens, the house vividly registers the constructed histories and suppressed, unaccountable racial relations that vex not only plantation mythology but national narratives of democratic possibility.

Chapter Four, “‘Home Thoughts’: Domestic Disarray and Buffet Flat Belonging in

Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*," brings another narrative of male-centered domesticity into the discussion and further develops the question of how racial identity, domestic space, and national belonging intersect. While the works studied in the first two chapters each center on a particular home, *Home to Harlem* raises the question of how domestic belonging and mobility can operate in tandem to provide an alternate vision of how domestic space might manifest democratic ideals. This chapter puts critical perspectives on the Harlem Renaissance into conversation with the cultural history of domestic space in 1920s New York in order to read notions of belonging through McKay's emphasis on the materiality of domestic life in the text, a materiality many critics have too easily glossed as aesthetic crudeness. The text highlights a series of quasi-domestic spaces—including boats, trains, and in particular the prominently featured 'buffet flats'—which evince a playful spatial signification in the text, aligning it more closely with modernist aesthetics than has been previously realized.

The heterotopic potential of these spaces—as well as the protagonist's ability to move easily between them—mirrors the instability for better or worse of the racial subject's position in society. Reading the text against the phenomenon of Harlem buffet flat parties as embedded within the broader contexts of the Great Migration, post-war masculinity, and literary international cosmopolitanism, I contend that McKay offers the "buffet flat" as a model for negotiating access to classed and raced spaces in the text, and ultimately, for understanding the racial and spatial dynamics of inclusion in the conceptual spaces of Harlem, the Harlem Renaissance, and the nation. The flexibility of these domestic spaces models as well an intellectual and geographical flexibility—or rather, mobility—which McKay simultaneously highlights as liberatory and uses to protest the problems of racial surveillance and discipline that make such flexibility necessary for survival.

The final chapter, “Lock and Key Blues: Mobile Domicility in the Recorded Works of Bessie Smith,” turns from literary texts to Bessie Smith’s blues, which I contend remind us that mobility may be no more liberating than domestic containment. I consider Smith’s lyrics alongside a series of contextual spaces, including her personal railroad car, the touring auto-cars rising in popularity alongside her fame, and the homes her voice entered by way of broadcast and recording technology. In the past few decades, scholars such as Angela Y. Davis and Hazel Carby have brought long overdue attention and respect to the work of Smith and other blueswomen work by restoring them to masculinist narratives of blues history and arguing that their rejection of conventional domestic roles represents a prototypical African American feminism. I extend and complicate previous feminist readings such as these by suggesting that Smith’s work, and that of black female blues artists more generally, re-imagines rather than rejects conventional domesticity. By privileging agency itself over specific domestic practices, and by explicitly portraying questions of economic, sexual, and physical power as defining features of domestic space, Smith offers a more radical vision than is generally recognized.

This chapter also expands the consideration of material domestic positioning, experience, and access to include the dimension of sound. With the recent rise of soundscape studies, critics have shown increasing attention to the acoustic environment, arguing that the often overlooked aural context is in fact an essential element of cultural production and the experience of cultural texts. With this framework in mind, I show how Smith’s own notion of a mobile domicile is reified by the sound and film technologies that project her work across spatial and racial boundaries, unsettling the aural constitution of normative American domestic life by changing the composition of listeners’ most intimate interior spaces, both material and ideological. Considering Smith’s lyrics and the mobile domestic ideology they espouse alongside the means

and effects of their dissemination shows how, in the lived experience of the early 20th century, such cultural productions could transform the very spaces they describe. This chapter thus concludes the larger discussion by suggesting that these works, by re-imagining the ideal coordinates and features of domestic space and practice, at once denaturalize the received model of ideal domesticity and reveal alternative interpretations and constructions—sometimes quite literally—of domestic belonging.

While these texts represent a temporal and geographical range in regards to both setting and authorship, I've selected a sequence that highlights a trajectory of spatial dislocation. I begin with a look at the conceptual fixing of ideal socio-spatial domesticity in a very specific material model in the early 20th century. The following chapters make a series of home visits, as it were, beginning with fixed domestic locations plagued (or in some cases delighted) by interior conflicts that create an overall sense of domestic instability. The last two chapters destabilize the home in more literal as well as conceptual ways, exploring visions of mobile domestic life and of what it means to reside in a world where one must continually move from one home space to another. Barnes and Faulkner feature narrative tension between their historical settings and more recent narration and/or authorship, thus exploring the degree to which ideal domesticity is located in imagined pasts. We then turn to McKay's Jake, who searches like Sutpen for a home that eludes him, but locates his ideal refuge in the imagined future represented by Harlem and finds solace in the opportunity mobility provides to seek out better futures elsewhere. Smith brings us back to the intensely experienced present of the blues expression, reminding us that mobility, while essential, has its own problems in the day to day, directing focus back to the ultimate importance of individual agency in determining one's own ideal domestic spaces and practices.

These varied visions both expand our understanding of cultural productions in the early

20th century by taking their stagings of domestic space seriously and provide useful models for reconsidering domestic ideals in our own cultural moment. That being said, I do not mean to suggest that they are alone, in American literary history, in doing so. But rather, the extent to which they do so, and the richness of the results, is often overlooked in favor of other critical issues in the individual texts I discuss here. Also, in part because these works come from what are generally recognized as different aesthetic groupings, critics have not previously noted their mutual investment in engaging the politics of domestic space. In order to fully appreciate this under-examined commonality, it is useful to consider it in relation to prevailing classifications of the literary domestic space.

Domestic Renovations

In many ways, the genre of domestic fiction would be the shared critical space that brings such texts into conversation with each other, but perhaps because domestic fiction is commonly characterized as a 19th-century phenomenon, the continuing literary emphasis on domestic spaces and subjects in the early 20th century tends to get subsumed instead into other scholarly concerns. Recently, however, there have been some exceptions. Examining modernist treatments of the nexus of market, home, and state that she calls “the domestic exterior” (5), Susan Edmunds argues that modernist writers “use grotesque modes of representation to deform and estrange the genre [of genteel domestic fiction], shuffling its contents and upending its conventions until...it becomes all but unrecognizable as such” (4). My project builds on Edmund’s argument in two key ways. First, by contributing further readings supporting the idea that this “radical reconstitution of the genre of domestic fiction” (Edmunds 4) represents a renovation, rather than a disappearance, of domestic fiction as a genre. Further, while Edmunds views this development

primarily as the “locus of modernists’ estrangement” from the rising welfare state (4), I widen the scope to include aesthetic upendings pitched towards other concerns than this aspect of national reform. Furthermore, I consider works by authors and artists who, though not commonly classified as modernists, do similar work in at once drawing on and reshuffling the contents of domestic fiction and the ideologies that permeate it in order to question broader cultural trends.

By finding similar aesthetic strategies and implications in works that are often separated by the critical lines—however contested—between modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, and pop culture, this study raises the question of the extent to which such domestic inversions are a matter of modernity as opposed to modernism, as distinguished by Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity*. While they may not be unique to modernism’s aesthetic projects, such tactics do align the strategies of varied texts in important ways. Thus without eliding important distinctions of artistic mode or intent, I would like to suggest that the notion of a continuing domestic fiction tradition allows for recognizing both aesthetic distinctions between and resonance amongst such distinct aesthetic projects or movements. The critical issue is that a number of authors and artists in different cultural corners in the early 20th century share an impulse to interrogate broader cultural drives toward the standardization of domestic space, experience, and identity. Others, meanwhile, seem to conform to such drives. Whatever perspectives they individually endorse, such works, taken together, constitute an important body of cultural productions focused on the contested meaning of the home.

Kristin Jacobson observes a similar textual grouping in recent work proposing a category of late 20th-century novels as “neodomestic fiction.” She contends that neodomestic fiction models alternatives to the stable homes of 19th-century domestic fiction, “recycling” (in Marangoly George’s sense) older forms of domestic fiction in order to actively promote unstable

homes and family configurations as a new kind of ideal. These implications emerge, she argues, through the focus on domestic space that unites these texts:

Neodomesticity's distinctive spatiality marks a new era and ideology for the genre of domestic fiction, while simultaneously recognizing its dynamic connections to earlier domestic literatures and traditions. Both domestic and neodomestic novels feature a self-consciousness about the home's physical space and the project of homemaking, highlighting domestic instability in positive and negative ways; however, neodomestic fiction—emerging after second-wave feminism and responding to a return to 'family values'—marks a paradigm shift: neodomestic fiction advances a politics of domestic instability, particularly emphasized through its distinctive domestic spaces and conclusions. Neodomestic novels intentionally demonstrate the exclusions associated with the single-family, privately-owned home. (3)

While Jacobson acknowledges that early 20th and even 19th-century domestic fiction “also invokes domestic uncertainty” in ways that “demand separate consideration” (3), she contends that these post-1980 novels perform a distinct revision of the genre.

While I build on the work of Jacobson and others exploring spatial frameworks for reading literary domesticity—and insisting on the ongoing importance of domestic fiction—I depart from Jacobson by suggesting that such destabilizations are by no means an innovation of the 1980s. Rather, many texts of the early 20th century, while they may not endorse it quite as self-consciously, stage domestic instability as an imperfect but important alternative to the tidier model, important largely because of the exclusions and erasures that domestic ideal performs. Indeed, criticism generally fails to recognize a continuing domestic fiction tradition in the early

20th century because fiction of this time often describes domestic life by dismantling, disputing, and otherwise denaturalizing its conventional forms, though it does indeed do so in ways specific to its own historical context. This project offers the kind of closer consideration of early 20th-century literary treatments of domestic uncertainty that Jacobson rightly suggests is needed, arguing that these texts do not represent a consolidated new domestic model or even a conscious refiguring of the earlier domestic fiction tradition so much as a shared stance of questioning, and often discrediting, the developing domestic ideal.

Another gap in our understanding of narratives of domesticity in this time has to do with the fact that, as Jacobson notes, critics tend to label male-authored or –centered narratives of domestic life in various ways but conspicuously not as domestic fiction (3). Thus, regarding early 20th-century texts as well as those produced earlier and later, assessments of domestic-focused fiction often leave out male perspectives. At times, the focus on female authorship, and on what have often been considered feminine subjects, has been strategic, facilitating feminist scholars' critical elevation of 19th-century female-authored texts that had previously been considered, more or less, the frivolous works of Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women."² This classification has done—and continues to do—the important critical work of validating otherwise marginalized authors and texts. My project furthers recent feminist and gender studies scholarship, however, that aims to intervene in this approach to domesticity and domestic fiction, resisting the automatic classification of "domestic subjects" as female concerns, and vice versa. While not primarily focused on showing how male-centered texts align with 19th-century female-authored sentimental fiction, I join Jacobson by bringing such texts into the conversation through their shared spatial domestic framework and their related "self-consciousness about the home's physical space and the project of homemaking" (3).

Rosemary Marangoly George argues that we must work “toward a deconstruction of the opposition that has traditionally been maintained between four points: the private and the public spheres; the two genders; the colonizer and the colonized; and the west and the rest of the world, especially their respective literatures” (3). Deconstructions of the separate spheres have now become commonplace. Criticism persists, however, in considering domestic fiction the work of female authors, describing, presumably, female concerns like home and family. At a certain point, this formulation ceases to empower and instead reinforces the sense that women are naturally concerned with home and family, while male-authored or –centered narratives about home, household, or family must also/instead be ultimately about more “universal” and explicitly political concerns. Or, more absurdly still, that such male-centered narratives of domestic life simply don’t exist or have anything notable in common with each other. While criticism now regularly recognizes the literary domestic as expressing and interacting with national and international politics, the critical bias in recognizing only female authors as authors of domestic fiction strangely maintains the notion that, however important it may be, the domestic sphere belongs to women (authors or otherwise) and they to it.

Whether or not any given instance of this association seems to disenfranchise, this critical tendency reproduces in canon politics the very sorts of gender bias that the validation of domestic fiction was meant to combat. And indeed, a sense of this consequence may explain, in part, why criticism tends to leave “domestic fiction” in the 19th century, as though doing so also firmly leaves this gender bias behind in that century along with its other limitations of women. Of course, as the no-separate-spheres line of criticism has demonstrated, the 19th-century domestic sphere, such as it was, was deeply imbricated with the public sphere all along, as did its representation in literature often express the politics of “public” life. At the same time, we must

note that the increasing acceptance of women's engagement outside the home in the 20th century neither stripped domestic life of its significance nor put an end to the production of literature that processes both interpersonal and national politics through the framework of domestic space and practice. Thus, as writers continue to be deeply concerned with the meaning of home well beyond the period that conceptually houses domestic fiction, I add my voice to those suggesting that we consider a spatially-focused definition of the genre. This shift in approach encourages new perspectives on 19th-century domestic fiction, and, more importantly still for my own study, facilitates inquiry into the ongoing narrative importance of domestically-focused literature—we might say narratives of domesticity—in the 20th century as well.

Some critical efforts are already underway to do just that, from one angle or another. A strengthening trajectory in modernist studies aims to address this bias by deconstructing the lingering opposition between modernism and domestic space and practice. As many have noted, a number of early modernist writers—whether male or female—self-consciously broke with the past by critiquing, if not out-right rejecting, conventional Victorian bourgeois domesticity. Many early critics of modernism, as well, saw its purpose in these terms (Fernald 828). Though the aims of modernism can seem as varied as its authors' individual projects, the recurring theme of critiquing and otherwise defamiliarizing a feminine-inflected bourgeois domesticity reinforces a general sense of masculine modernism opposing feminine domesticity. Contemporary criticism recognizes that, of course, modernism is by no means an exclusively masculine domain, nor is the domestic realm (and related literature) populated by, important to, or written about by women alone. Still, as Anne Fernald suggests in a review of recent criticism investigating the relationship between modernism, marriage, and other domestic concerns, while criticism has come a long way since “the days in which modernism referred to the men of 1922” (828), there

is still a long way to go in giving “the domestic side of modernism” (835) its full due.

One of the critics Fernald considers is Victoria Rosner, who argues, in *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, that for all the critical attention to modernism’s ground-breaking approach to psychic interiority, little attention has been paid to the *spatial* dimension of interiority. She argues that domestic spaces and architectural history provide modernists with a “conceptual vocabulary” (2) that sustains the preoccupation with domestic interiors she sees as central to many British modernist works (Garrity 165). Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei also see domestic architecture as vital to understanding British modernism. Identifying both novels and domestic spaces as “texts that organize social relations” (18), they see in interwar British fiction a “domestic modernism” (34) in which women novelists “quietly undid the gendered binary” that assumed mass culture and bourgeois culture to be feminine and genuine, aesthetically superior, “serious” literature to be the work of men. This fiction, they argue, was also characterized by female modernists’ ambivalence towards the home as a space that prolonged attachment to conservative values following the comparative social instability—and thus progressive possibility—of wartime England. Noting that, as Rita Felski has argued, “the vocabulary of modernity is a vocabulary of the anti-home” (Felski 48), they draw on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* (19) to suggest that the nexus of literary production and domestic material space and practice is nonetheless central to the construction of modernism.

While these and other scholarly works insist on further consideration of architectural history and the individual domestic spaces that permeate literature and structure authors’ lives, the trend to read modernism in concert with rather than as opposed to domestic concerns tends to focus on British modernism. In this project, I join with a handful of scholars who bring American texts and contexts into the conversation about literature revolving around domestic spaces and

subjects in the 20th century, whether in direct reference to modernist aesthetics or otherwise. Marilyn Chandler's *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*, for instance, conducts a set of "house tours" through important literary houses spanning the mid-19th to late 20th centuries, exploring the significance of domestic architecture to the formation of individual and national character. Elizabeth Klimasmith's *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930* describes a modern subject constructed by urban domestic spaces, primarily considering 19th-century examples but tracing their influence briefly into the early 20th century. Others primarily take up later 20th-century forms of domestic arrangement, as in Catherine Jurca's *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century Novel*, Jacobson's study of "neodomestic" post-1980 American fiction, or Susan Fraiman's notion of "oppositional domesticity" as modeled by complex domestic figures in 19th-century texts and further displayed by contemporary shelter magazines and controversial home-maker celebrities such as Martha Stewart. These and other works address the ongoing importance of domestic space and subjects in literature beyond the 19th century in substantial and illuminating ways. However, they tend to focus earlier or later, or to offer in-depth and focused treatments of individual 20th-century works suggesting that broader consideration of these decades would be warranted. Overall, these works both support and demand more sustained focus on texts exploring the significance of home in the early 20th century, whether in relation to modernism, specifically, or other relevant cultural phenomena in this time period.

Regarding that relevant cultural history, there is also a substantial body of critical work examining architectural history, the politics of housing, and the changing features of domestic interiors from the late 19th century through the early decades of the 20th. While it cannot complete the task alone, this study works toward bringing an understanding of this history of

American material culture into conversation with the literary works it informs, thus offering a grounded reading of early 20th-century literary productions of domesticity and the continuing domestic fiction tradition they represent. While each chapter will offer an in-depth reading of the relation between a given text and its vital cultural context, the following section will provide a broader overview of the drive toward domestic standardization that constitutes their shared background as well as a brief consideration of spatial theory that informs this collection of readings by illuminating the relationship between conceptions of democracy and domestic space.

Notes

¹ Although some claim that it comes from an 1802 letter, it has been found nowhere in his writings, and fact checkers note that the terms “inflation” and “deflation” have not been documented as being used in Jefferson’s time.

² For an overview of the development of the term “domestic fiction” and contemporary stances for and against its implications, see Jacobson, Chapter One, “Remapping Domestic Fiction,” especially pp. 19-26.

Chapter One

A Solid American Space: From Domestic Standardization to Dilemmatic Democracy

With the 1922 publication of *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis brought American readers into the spectacularly ordinary home of the spectacularly ordinary George Babbitt—realtor, family man, community leader, and “Solid Citizen” (9). The novel establishes Babbitt as the model middle-class businessman and then follows him through a brief rise in prominence, a brief rebellion against the conventional conservatism of his community, and a rushed return from the moral quagmires of adultery and parlor socialism back to the fold of “decency.” Lewis takes the reader on this journey, ultimately, in order to lampoon Babbitt and his ilk for their hypocrisy. He takes the zeitgeist to task, seeming to make Babbitt emblematic of the danger of sacrificing moral character and independent thought at the altar of middle-class propriety and prosperity. He does this first by presenting Babbitt as representative of the ways in which middle-class aspirations can encourage mindless conformity. He then indicts the Babbitts of the world by drawing attention to the very issue of representativeness, raising among others the question of what is at stake in the quest to blend in.

Babbitt’s initial, and ultimately recuperated, position as a “Solid American Citizen” (152) is closely tied to also being what he himself identifies as “the Standardized American Citizen” (153) in a comment referencing ideologies of standardization and scientific efficiency that had swept the nation in recent decades. This notion of standardization, upon which good citizenship is apparently contingent, is quickly and quite literally located in Babbitt’s home. Lewis emphasizes the standardization of domestic space in an early passage that characterizes Babbitt’s household interior in some detail:

The room displayed a modest and pleasant color-scheme, after one of the best

standard designs of the decorator who ‘did the interiors’ for most of the speculative-builders’ houses in Zenith. The walls were gray, the woodwork white, the rug a serene blue; and very much like mahogany was the furniture—the bureau with its great clear mirror, Mrs. Babbitt’s dressing-table with toilet-articles of almost solid silver, the plain twin beds, between them a small table holding a standard electric bedside lamp, a glass for water, and a standard bedside book with colored illustrations—what particular book it was cannot be ascertained, since no one had ever opened it. The mattresses were firm but not hard, triumphant modern mattresses which had cost a great deal of money; the hot-water radiator was of exactly the proper scientific surface for the cubic contents of the room. The windows were large and easily opened, with the best catches and cords, and Holland roller-shades guaranteed not to crack. It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of *Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes*. . . . Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this. (13)

The space has, in a sense, the distinction of indistinction—it is a “masterpiece,” but a masterpiece of middleness, for “Medium Incomes.” It sports not just “one of the best” designs available, but “one of the best *standard* designs” (emphasis mine) available from the same interior designer who designed “most of the speculative-builders’ houses” in the city. Babbitt’s bedroom is remarkable, essentially, for being indistinguishable from the bedrooms of “every second house” in the neighborhood. Lewis presents it as a recognizable type rather than a unique space suited to the intimate needs of its occupants. He even goes on to critique it by undermining Babbitt’s satisfaction with the statement that the room’s quality “had nothing to do with the

Babbitts, nor with anyone else,” having no sense about it of being filled with actual “life” or “love” but rather having “the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel” (13). It is evacuated of individuality and affect, becoming a model home not so much in the sense of representing the best in domestic comforts but in the sense that no one really lives in it.

In this regard, it betrays a sort of desire for the home—supposedly the seat of intimate affections—to in fact be blessedly empty of the literal and emotional messiness of actual human interaction. Considering the domestic imagery of shelter magazines, Susan Fraiman argues that more recent female domestic icons challenge gender norms by being attached to this sort of attractive, conventionally well-designed, and importantly empty space—for, as Fraiman points out, shelter magazines rarely feature rooms with any people in them. While it can be considered “oppositional domesticity” (274) for a woman to crave the evacuation of such spaces as “refuge from marital mess and instability” (Fraiman 263), George Babbitt and his compatriots would likely consider his appreciation of an empty home his God-given right as a man who’s “worked like the dickens all day” and shouldn’t be nagged into dressing for dinner after a long day of boisterousness and Boosterism (11). Still, Lewis critiques Mr. and Mrs. Babbitt alike for the degree to which their domestic life is, in many ways, domestic lifelessness—a space of performance rather than, for instance, one of true refuge or nurturing. In the great tradition of literary domestic dissemblers, the Babbitts, like *Gatsby*, have essentially failed to cut the pages. Their bedside book has never been opened, and the replacement of interior integrity with interior design is summed up in the indictment that caps the description of the Babbitts’ domestic space: “In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house. It was not a home” (14).

What, ultimately, makes this critical distinction for Lewis between houses and homes, between surfaces and substance? And what is at stake in the failure to bring home and house into

alignment? The answers, I would suggest, lie in Babbitt's idealization of standard-ness for its own sake, and further still, in the larger context of his contemporary housing discourse, which had recently been transformed by the sense that the home could and should be standardized in the first place. From its "standard electric" lamp and "standard" unread bedside book to its windows with "the best catches and cords," what characterizes Babbitt's type of ideal space is its particular combination of the sense of prestige with the sense of unremarkability. Here, the "standard" and the "best" are conflated rather than opposed. The furniture is "very much like mahogany" and Mrs. Babbitt's items are "almost solid silver"—they are the best, presumably, of cheerful modern accessories for medium incomes. What could be seen as inadequacy, however, is rather characterized as "triumphant," for both the structural and interior design of the domicile represent the ideal balance, in Babbitt's world, of hearty but moderate prosperity and reassuring conformity. Within the home, that balance must be maintained by careful attention to the appearance of proper, standard family life over the threatening particularly of individual human feelings. The intimate link between these kinds of moderation, these ways of emphatically not standing out, is reaffirmed throughout the novel when Babbitt's dalliance with political nonconformity—fueled in part by the inability to reconcile rebellious feelings about his marriage and family life—directly threatens his business standing and thus his class security.

Babbitt's conflation of the "standard" and the "best," ultimately, serves as more than a metaphor for his world view. It makes him the "Solid Citizen" he is (Lewis 9). Looking out at his grounds, Babbitt is "delighted" by his lawn: "it was perfection, and made him also perfect" (5). Lewis shows that in Babbitt's mind, at least, the crafting of one's ideal domestic environment, whether bedroom or yard, in fact directly produces one's ideal self. Babbitt extends this logic as well to show how promoting the ideal domestic arrangement can make the nation also perfect—

and he's just getting started. At the pinnacle of his prominence as a citizen of Zenith, he delivers a speech that makes his model life the model for the globe, saying,

it's the fellow with four to ten thousand a year, say, and an automobile and a nice little family in a bungalow on the edge of town, that makes the wheels of progress go round! That's the type of fellow that's ruling America today; in fact, it's the ideal type to which the entire world must tend, if there's to be a decent, well-balanced, Christian, go-ahead future for this little old planet! Once in a while I just naturally sit back and size up this Solid American Citizen, with a whale of a lot of satisfaction. (152)

This is the moment when the ideal domestic package Babbitt describes—already shown to construct his own sense of success and belonging in the ranks of solid American citizens—goes imperial. He not only glorifies his own standard home but makes the head of such a household the “ideal type,” the model to which the whole world should conform. He makes global space intimate by turning it into “this little old planet,” and he makes his own intimate arrangements the global ideal by suggesting it would be best for everyone—truly *everyone*—if domestic life the world over were standardized into the space of good Christian citizenship, American middle-class values, and “the best of inexpensive rugs” (14), for these things, he suggests, are one and the same. He has already suggested, furthermore, that perfecting the material space of domestic life will produce these larger social and political results by perfecting, in turn, those who meet his “specifications.”

Lewis points, ultimately, to the danger of Babbitt's perspective, showing how the desire to conspicuously live up to a certain standard can slide into a notion of standardization bordering on mindless, dangerous conformity. This impetus to standardize the framework of intimate

family life, mapped as it is onto the terrain of the “entire world,” indicates further that the idea of a domestic standard applies well beyond the individual family household in middle-class middle America. As Lewis suggests, it is linked to a broader worldview in which the most intimate spaces and practices of people everywhere should be standardized to conform to American values. The fact that Babbitt is a realtor immediately foregrounds the trope of housing as central to Lewis’ concerns. As he climbs the ranks of his society, however, his promotion of the middle-class suburban ideal as the machine of progress turns up the spotlight on domestic space as the site that links one’s most intimate, private thoughts and practices to the determination of cultural values and civic legitimacy on a much broader scale. In this sense, the text highlights not only the follies of George Follansbee Babbitt, but the potential insidiousness of the house he’s selling.

Of course, that being said, Babbitt’s selling it doesn’t mean all his customers, much less readers, are buying it. The Editors of Fortune Magazine, for instance, preface a 1932 study of housing conditions in the U.S. with a commentary on the novel. They protest the fact that while readers might be split on whether or not they like realism, they continue to be curiously united in considering *Babbitt* to be realism. They see the character himself as convincingly representative of the “average American of our time” (4) and his modern, comfortable house and bath as

typical. America, it was said, was like that—an El Dorado of Plumbing, a Paradise of Sleeping Porches...and two-car garages running from golf club to golf club across the Atlantaic tidewater...to the Rockies and the Sierras and the sea. Even Mr. Lewis’s enemies did not quarrel with his realism. They quarreled with his Americanism. And never, so far as memory serves, did any of them suggest that the real trouble with *Babbitt* was not at all its disgust with the material opulence of American civilization, but its childlike faith that the opulence existed.

Never did a critic rise to say that *Babbitt*, as a saga of the age, was not realism, but rich, luxurious romance. (4)

For these commentators, the issue is not even quite Babbitt's hypocrisy but the hypocrisy of a post-Crash culture that continues to indulge itself in debating the finer points of Babbitt's standards when "*less than half the homes in America measure up to minimum standards of health and decency*" (5, emphasis in original). The critique then moves into a book-length study of housing conditions for the poor in a deepening Depression, social and political reasons for persistent corruption within the housing industry, and the potential for new models in affordable and efficient housing design. While their perspective complicates Lewis' stance by reading the novel through the dual lenses of massive economic change and explicit reformist intent, it also amplifies something Lewis himself had already taken as a premise: the fact that the contest over accurate representation of American domestic space—both real and ideal—is essential to the conception of success, belonging, and even survival, in the larger conceptual home of the nation.

For, as these critics point out in 1932 in phrasing that echoes straight down the corridors of time to more recent controversies over how and where we dwell—over how we "occupy" space—Babbitt "becomes a novel of the richest 1 per cent" (5). By opening a study of housing politics with this discussion of Babbitt, the Editors of *Fortune* signal not only the high stakes of housing policy but the importance of literature—for those who are well-enough situated to read it in the first place, at least—in shaping cultural attitudes towards it. They also signal the importance of literature concerned with housing, in particular, to perceptions of class difference, civic identity, and the degree to which both of these dynamics affect and are affected by the lived experience of domestic space.

As I have been suggesting, we have only begun to consider literary production in the

early 20th century in relation to the cultural history of domestic space in this time—in terms of both its material and conceptual construction. As *Babbitt*'s emphasis on the best standard American home suggests, it is particularly important that we examine more closely the domestic ideals put forth in the early 20th century in order to understand just how the idealized nexus of standardization, Americanness, and citizenship came to be located in such a specific vision of ideal domestic space. To that end, it is useful to more closely consider the features of the ethos of domestic standardization developing in this time period, paying attention to both its spatial and conceptual modes.

A Nice Little Family in a Bungalow on the Edge of Town

Drives toward identifying and promoting a particular kind of domestic arrangement were not so much unique to the early 20th century as newly animated, in these decades, by concepts and technologies that increased popular devotion to the idea that the American home could and should conform to a specific material and ideological standard. One prominent cultural component of this drive was the “Own Your Own Home” campaign, which began in 1917 and two years later came under the aegis of the Department of Labor. The standard it promoted, essentially, was the suburban single-family bungalow, surrounded by well-tended yard and housing a heterosexual couple with children. The idealization of this sort of household wasn't exactly brand new in its time. Rather, it represents a transition that had been taking place over the previous two centuries from John Winthrop's exhortation to build the Puritan “city on a hill”—where all would work together in godly righteousness to make a refuge from what fellow colonist William Bradford described as the “wilderness” of this new land—to the more modern, individualistic Jeffersonian republican ideal recast for a new age of mass production and media.

As Paul C. Luken and Suzanne Vaughan point out, the Land Ordinance of 1785 helped to facilitate this shift from the “colonial vision of the ideal city” to the “substitution of the dream of the single-family home,” a dream that was consistent with the Jeffersonian ideal of a nation comprised of yeoman farmers laboring on their own property (1621). The Ordinance provided a precedent in more ways than one. Most directly, it facilitated a modern model of homeownership by parsing land for individual property-holders approved by the state (i.e., the children of the aforementioned conquering Fathers), conceptually erasing in the process any who occupied such land but were not considered socially or politically viable citizens. Also, Jefferson and others conceived the Ordinance in order to help Continental Congress raise revenue on inhabitants they didn’t have the power to directly tax. In this regard, it provides a precedent for later promotions of property-holding citizenship by yoking a model of domestic life for the American individual to an agenda of political and financial gain for larger civic and institutional powers.

The following century would see an array of social and political efforts to protect, provide, and/or improve housing for various populations, from the Homestead Acts (which continued, of course, the noble tradition of democratizing land access by dehumanizing the native Americans who already lived on such “unclaimed” lands) to Reconstruction policies that attempted, if often ineffectively, to enfranchise freed slaves by giving them access to property, to Progressive Era settlement-houses and related pushes to improve life for the urban poor. Robert Fairbanks identifies these Progressive Era efforts—which aimed to ameliorate living conditions, particularly in urban tenements, for the sake of both physical and moral health—as the rise of the first housing movement. Considering late 19th and early 20th century conceptions of the relationship between architecture, public health, and proper citizenship, he notes that while this housing movement was the first in which more isolated efforts at tenement and housing reform

culminated in national organization, it dissipated relatively quickly as accepted definitions of good housing changed.

The advent of WWI, however, would spur a new and more institutionally-driven housing movement, which, as Eric Karolak discusses, was marked by its integration of federal concerns about both housing and labor. As part of an “unprecedented ‘total war’ effort, the federal government launched the first proactive and coordinated national programs to address the ‘labor problem’ and the ‘housing problem,’” developing a costly large-scale scheme for funding and building homes and model industrial villages for workers around the nation (Karolak 60). While the motives behind such programs were complicated by the involvement of reformers and architects intent on their own notions of community building, the government’s main intent was to stabilize and increase labor productivity, as well as to stabilize social life more generally and decrease the likelihood of revolt of any kind in the midst of burgeoning international conflict (Karolak 60). The new federal involvement in American housing conditions differed from previous reform efforts in its focus on wartime production rather than on the moral and physical wellbeing of those dwelling in crowded, ramshackle, and unsanitary conditions. Both endeavors, however, worked on the prevailing notion that certain material domestic spaces would produce certain behaviors and types of character, for better or worse. Architects and planners, with the backing of the federal government, “sought to redefine the social identity of U.S. workers and their families and to reconstruct the working class into an idealized image of the American middle class by molding the built environment of the former” (Karolak 61). WWI thus ushered in a new era of state involvement in shaping the desired citizen by determining, and often constructing outright, the material features of his or her household.

The developing ethos of homeownership citizenship took many forms. In an essay tracing

Herbert Hoover's interwar housing policy, Janet Hutchison identifies an array of federally-endorsed housing associations that promoted the suburban ideal. These included the "Own Your Own Home" campaign, the Better Homes in America Movement, the Architects' Small House Service Bureau, and the Home Modernizing Bureau.¹ These programs operated across the nation by disseminating printed ads and booklets, exhibiting model homes, offering instruction in home management, and otherwise actively encouraging community involvement in learning and promoting an ideology of ideal domestic space and practice. Hutchison demonstrates that while there was an abrupt decrease in direct federal development of housing policy after its wartime activism, Hoover, as Secretary of the Department of Commerce, played a significant role in sustaining federal promotion of a certain vision of homeownership largely through state endorsement of and involvement in such programs.

The "Own Your Own Home" (OYOH) campaigns of the teens and twenties, in particular, crystallize this interface between federal efforts to mold ideal Americans through their domestic environments and the subtler social valences of such efforts. In its independent form, the OYOH campaign began in 1917, but in 1919, the government established an "Own-Your-Own-Home Section" in the Department of Labor's Division of Public Works and Construction Development, thus attaching a new political charge to the campaign's already multi-faceted, if not exactly subtle, agenda (Lands 1607). Most simply, it urged people to purchase homes, but as various scholars have demonstrated, what is most striking is the particular sorts of homes it encouraged people to purchase. And perhaps more notable still, the particular sorts of people it encouraged purchasers to be—whether already, or as a result of their successful adherence to the citizen-homeowner doctrine.

Pursuing the notion that textual productions organize social relations, Luken and

Vaughan examine a collection of printed materials from the Own Your Own Home movement and argue that the campaign materials worked to organize specific people into specific types of homes. The materials include a mix of illustrations and text that work, ultimately, to organize “white, working class, married couples with children as the owners of homes”(1603). For in these images, “[t]he people are always white, well dressed, urban, heterosexual couples and families, while the houses are always single-family, detached bungalows with gracefully landscaped yards” (Luken and Vaughan 1610). By representing such individuals as owners of such homes, the campaign identified a very particular social and material configuration as the ideal, thus indicating approval of people already living in that configuration, encouraging any who could attain that ideal to do so, and implicitly excluding from the possibility of “success” any whose racial, ethnic, sexual, or class identities would never match the picture.

War-labor housing organizations had “made unprecedented incursions into the private lives of...citizens,” specifying “the physical context of home life” by determining details such as “the size of workers’ living rooms...the furnishing possibilities of their bedrooms...[and] the outfitting of their kitchens” in order to shape the identities of those who lived and worked in these spaces (Karolak 73). What those building and design efforts did for the physical spaces of American homes, OYOH ads did for the conceptual space of homeowner desire and self-evaluation. In a sense, the government thus performed a further unprecedented incursion into the private lives of citizens through these materials—or at least, into the private lives of the white, working class citizens they targeted, as opposed, for instance, to Native Americans and African Americans whose domestic experience had been determined far more directly by the government over the years. For the targeted audience, however, the state crossed a new line by explicitly endorsing a distinct visual and conceptual model for the domestic space they should aspire to.

And further, by investing that model with the idea that only by conforming to the advertised household configuration—one in which material and social features are importantly linked—could individuals achieve a state of valid selfhood.

The OYOH materials suggested that following the guidelines for what type of home and family to create carried high stakes. As demonstrated by scholars such as Luken and Vaughan, LeeAnn Lands, and Janet Hutchison, the campaign outlined ideal family structures, the gendered roles family members should play, and the essential connection between a particular relationship to domestic space (i.e., owning a single-family suburban bungalow) and a particular relationship to the nation (i.e., good citizenship). One ad claimed that owning a home would be “the bed-rock of useful citizenship” (Lands 955), while others also highlighted its effects on good parenting, gender performance, labor, and Americanness in addition to citizenship (Luken and Vaughan 1615). Campaign materials promoted a household arrangement in which the husband is the owner and overseer, pursuing his career that much more effectively outside the home because he knows his wife and children are performing their own roles admirably within it. Both in his position as war laborer and potential citizen-home-owner, the man of the house is clearly directed, in both campaign materials and the broader discourse that surrounded them, to demonstrate his commitment to the nation through home building and/or ownership. As Lands notes, the National Association of Real Estate Boards “was unabashed in forging equivalencies, declaring “BE PATRIOTIC! BUY A HOME!” (951). Such rhetoric seems to have been animated as well by the sense that encouraging property ownership would prevent the spread of socialism, as home owners would be invested in societal stability. Lewis refers to this notion in *Babbitt*, for instance, when a rash of strikes splits the town between “courageous friend[s] of Labor” and “fearless supporter[s] of the Rights of Property” (258), and indeed, scholars have suggested that

diffusion of home ownership across class is “one of the reasons why socialism...never gained a hold on the hearts and minds of the American working class” (Harris and Hamnett 176).

The wife in this nation-stabilizing domestic model, meanwhile, is the “household technocrat” and consumer (Hutchison 81), the idealized figurehead of the cult of domesticity. For all the emphasis on women’s domestic tasks, though, campaign materials also heavily emphasize the civic importance of their gender performance and domestic habits. In a solicited endorsement, the OYOH Section used the power of pop culture to influence women’s domestic values and practices by conveying a popular actress’s insistence that “Mothers, from time immemorial, have known to fight for the safety of dear ones. May I not fairly state that the American Mother needs this weapon of Ownership to preserve, intact, her Home?” (Luken and Vaughan 1612). The notion of female home-making as a martial act continues in post-war materials exhorting the American woman to be “a genuine Home Maker, in your own Home” in order to carry on the wartime work of keeping the home intact for their fighting husbands and sons, to ensure that they haven’t fought for nothing (Luken and Vaughan (1613). Such ads register a societal tendency on the one hand to encourage women’s work for the wellbeing of the nation—work which brought many *out* of the home into “masculine” roles—and on the other hand, to reassert the rigid gendered social scheme that the war had thrown into disarray. They also keep the stakes of improper domestic performance clearly in view. For men and women alike, to fail to be part of the stable, heteronormative, home owning and home-making citizenry, was to fail to do one’s civic duty. If you don’t buy a house and/or starch the curtains within it, the terrorists win.

In addition to reflecting the awkwardness of wartime and post-war attitudes towards women, framing female domestic practice as a weapon signals a resonance between the politics

of homemaking within and outside one's own nation. As various scholars of post-colonial literature and U.S. empire have demonstrated, "private" domestic practices are deeply intertwined with the workings of empire. In *The Politics of Home*, for instance, Rosemary Marangoly George outlines the implications of imperial homemaking for boosting the perceived civic legitimacy of British women's domestic work. She demonstrates, further, that in regards to post-colonial and imperial novels, "the tales and tasks of homemaking (understood to be gendered female) are not very different from the tales and tasks of house-keeping on the national or imperial scale (usually gendered masculine)" (5). Along similar lines but regarding 19th-century American literature, Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity" demonstrates how the notion of the domestic "links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home" (Kaplan, *Manifest* 581), thus shifting the emphasis from gender to racial demarcations of otherness. These sorts of dynamics, Marangoly George demonstrates, reveal "the violence, terror and difference that is repressed in everyday securing of a home" (27), contrary to the notion of home as a refuge from such things.

This perspective highlights the social violence coded into a discourse like that of the OYOH campaigns, which regularly figure white, heterosexual, middle-class subjects and their domestic arrangements as the norm. For, to put it as succinctly as the ads themselves, only by conforming to the homeownership model could one be a "real American" (Luken and Vaughan 1615). And of course, land-of-opportunity narratives and the privileges of legal citizenship notwithstanding, *not* being considered a "real" American for whatever reason has historically increased one's chances of suffering anything from petty discrimination to lethal hate crimes. Insofar as home represents comfort, security, and belonging, it is defined by the opposite

conditions. Like all forms of inclusion, it depends upon exclusion. In turn, defining a model domestic space in which people—but, it seems, only the kinds of people represented—should feel at home means investing that space with a set of power relations which, in theory, will keep inside what is perceived as good and keep outside what is perceived as bad. Marangoly Goeorge contends that

Imagining a home is as political an act as imagining a nation. Establishing either is an act of hegemonic power. Similarly, having all these markers laid out for one to step into as part of a naturalized socialization process is an indication of the power wielded by class, community, and race (6).

This notion applies just as fully to the act of establishing the model itself to which homemaking practices are expected to conform. To exclude non-normative subjects and living spaces from the conceptual model of the ideal home is to categorize them, essentially, as the trouble outside. This conceptual violence against non-normative domestic subjects and spaces, when understood in relation to democratic ideals of inclusion, expresses perhaps the most central, destructive, and enduring conflict in American culture: the contentious question of who can truly belong.

Of course, OYOH campaigns by no means constituted the lone voice in early 20th-century housing discourse, and other movements accounted for the potential domestic belonging of a wider range of Americans. Tracing the activity of home improvement campaigns in Tennessee from 1914 through the 1920s, Mary Hoffschwelle demonstrates that despite much reform energy being directed at urban and immigrant populations in particular, reformers also targeted Southern rural families, especially women, in an effort to modernize farm homes and thus entice young people to stay on the farms and keep them producing rather than follow the trend and move to the cities. As in other instances of reform, these projects emphasized uplift—

and thus a fuller incorporation into mainstream respectability—through a combination of domestic management skills and active consumerism in the homes of white and black families alike.² The attention to both white and black domestic spaces traced here reminds us that conforming to a sanctioned model of domestic space and practice was promoted across racial lines in many reform efforts if not explicitly in OYOH materials. Hoffschwelle notes, though, that “[e]xtension programs also replicated the South’s racial divisions by requiring separated white and black southern extension staff and club organizations” (53). While many worked actively to push a variety of socially-identified people towards a fairly consolidated model of ideal domestic life, the unity of the goal belied enduring prejudice in both modes of promotion and reactions to attainment of such goals.

Barbara Mooney explains that while African American educators and reformers promoted a domestic model similar in many ways to that of the OYOH campaigns, this model became a point of contention for leading black thinkers. Mooney traces the iconography of African American domestic space from emancipation through the 1920s. She demonstrates how ex-slave and abolitionist authors similarly equated dignified and cleanly domestic living with personal worth, even while accounting for the prohibitive conditions of slavery. That equation was further developed once slavery ended and black citizens could enact their newfound citizenship and express their long-suppressed social legitimacy by building, owning, and/or appropriately managing the domestic spatial ideal Booker T. Washington described as “a ‘comfortable, tasty, framed cottage’” (54). African American educational institutions and reformers alike promoted this sort of modest but beautiful, well-built and -decorated home not only as “decent shelter, but as a tool to combat prejudice and as a strategy for gaining social acceptance within a dominant European culture” (Mooney 48).

Mooney also points, however, to something the housing discourse of the teens and 20s often masked: the fact that deep-seated racial prejudice continued to interfere with the supposedly straightforward formula of the American Dream as realized through housing. As multiple examples suggest, including growing doubts W.E.B. DuBois expressed in his own writing as well as through editorial choices in *The Crisis*, the idealized domestic model had its downsides when understood in the context of historic and ongoing racial oppression. Reformers promoted the idea all should have “respect for housekeeping as a profession” (“Household Efficiency”). Some felt, though, that due to the history of enforced domestic labor under slavery, “domestic labor was too oppressing to be understood as noble” (Mooney 64). And in light of the more recent trend of black women working as domestics, there was nothing new in seeing housework as a job, regardless of attempts to recast it as a more highly esteemed one.

Furthermore, attaining the household ideal could trigger white resentment as easily as garner respect for African Americans. As Mooney suggests, “[s]o intimately associated was middle-class domestic architecture with the construction of whiteness and white superiority that black possession of the comfortable, tasty, framed cottage often ignited, like the act of reading or voting, a violent white response” (64). A relatively uniform household model was touted by and to individuals of varied subject positions as a key to social status and full belonging in the national community. As complications like this indicate, however, that model could just as easily expose, or even ignite, racial tensions as ameliorate them, a fact not lost on authors confronting the social implications of domestic space and experience.

It is resentment of the kind noted above, for instance, that Charles Chesnutt documents in his 1901 novel and sociological study *The Marrow of Tradition*. Based on a vicious riot that transformed the actual town of Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898, the novel follows a

successful black doctor who represents the shifting racial politics of the postbellum social structure. Bryan Wagner argues that Chesnutt presents white violence in the novel as “a response to the rising African American middle class,” and thus to a set of changes that “white characters experience...as visible threats to their identity” (“Charles Chesnutt” 312). African Americans in Wilmington and its fictional representation “eroded the visual foundations of white supremacy,” Wagner suggests, by relating to private and public spaces in new ways that included “transforming the city’s demographics by purchasing homes and businesses in predominantly white neighborhoods” (“Charles Chesnutt” 313). For white characters in the novel, this visible evidence of African American prosperity “disturb[s] their visual field” (Wagner, “Charles Chesnutt” 313). These “disturbances of vision” (“Charles Chesnutt” 313) then provoke an “epistemological crisis that is simultaneously a crisis of white identity,” as indicated when Chesnutt critiques racial violence in the text “by highlighting the elaborate interface of race, class, and urban *visibility*” (Wagner, “Charles Chesnutt” 312, emphasis mine).

The changing racial occupancy of private and commercial spaces at the turn of the century does indeed interfere with the visual epistemology of racism, in Chesnutt’s novel as well as any number of other texts and contemporary urban locations real and imagined. It is also useful to think of this epistemology of racial vision in terms of what Briganti and Mezei propose as “an epistemology of the domestic, what Derrida described as the possibility of thought belonging to the architectural moment, to desire, to creation” (13). Visible proof that people live in attractive, comfortable, middle-class homes—or conduct their livelihoods in similarly marked spaces—which their social identity would have once prohibited them from matters not only because it complicates a system of social value and self-worth based on visual cues but because living spaces play an important role in how people understand experience and identity, whether

their own or that of others.

As for how such processes of knowledge production relate to models of domestic occupancy, the spaces and locations in which individuals can comfortably live reflect nothing less than the terms of peaceful existence (and pursuit of happiness, etc.) for an individual in society. Texts concerned with domestic space similarly investigate these terms. Insofar as intellectual creation is conceptual architecture, and insofar as houses and texts both organize intimate perceptions as well as individual and community experience, literary living spaces have a profound capacity to express, critique, and shape how a culture imagines the interface between material and socio-intellectual experience. Not to mention how the cultural imagination views the politics of permission to peacefully inhabit any space, material or conceptual, that is understood to be a shared home, whether it is an apartment building, a neighborhood, a narrative, or a nation.

Domecility in the Age of Hom(e)ogenization

As Chesnutt demonstrates, and as early 20th-century housing models seem to suggest, peaceful belonging often hinges on blending in, whether in terms of race, class, or other identity markers a community might prioritize. One way of seeing this dynamic is that to be comfortably “at home” is to be successfully homogenized.³ This brings us to another essential context for reading American domestic space in this time period: the rise of ideologies and technologies of standardization and mass-production represented by Taylorism and Fordism, respectively. These movements, of course, transformed American culture in ways by no means limited to their direct effects on the material space of the household. Their widespread importance, however, only highlights the stakes of the ways in which they did operate on the material and social

construction of the home. For they did indeed influence the material production of domestic space, reshape practices within it, and revamp attitudes toward it, in part by filling it with standardized commercial products in a new way. While the Department of Labor, OYOH campaigns, Better Homes in America, and other organizations provided a conceptual model for proper domestic life, technologies and ideologies of standardization and mass-production made it possible to conform to the model in a very tangible way.

Indeed, well before the Department of Labor took up the OYOH campaign, Frederick Winslow Taylor was promoting the use of “scientific efficiency” to increase productivity; he worked primarily in manufacturing, but his ideas translated quickly into a philosophy of household management. Taylor advocated breaking tasks down into smaller segments that could be easily performed by unskilled workers. He did this in part through time and motion studies that in turn informed adjustment of working spaces in order to maximize productivity and profits. His 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management* outlined these principles, providing the basis for large-scale assembly-line manufacturing. It was also taken up by reformers who aimed to improve domestic life by arranging households for maximum domestic efficiency, both in terms of increasing productivity and eliminating what they considered wasted movement and effort. Martha Banta suggests, in fact, that “it is *especially* family living that the ethos of good management wishes to commandeer,” as indicated by the “constant cry of reformers intent upon introducing sound management methods to combat social disarray” (10). That social disarray could mean anything from the squalor of deep poverty to immigrants failing in subtler ways to fully “Americanize” their homes and selves.

Scientific efficiency, whether in the work place or the home-place, explicitly advocated controlling the movements of individuals, and ultimately populations. At its most localized, this

might mean arranging work surfaces to minimize the time a factory-worker or housewife spent moving between them. On a broader scale, it generally involved considering immigrants, in particular, as a monolithic body of unruly, inefficient, wasteful individuals that had to be reformed for the wellbeing of themselves and the nation they increasingly constituted. For, as Janet Hutchison and others note, it was assumed that they “lived in filthy ignorance” and “needed dictates on cleanliness of kitchens, minds, and bodies” (“The Cure” 178). Taylorism offered very specific guidelines for those dictates.

That being said, it offered equally specific guidelines for the native-born middle- and upper-class housewife, for the different purpose of casting her as an expertly-trained professional. In a 1911 New York Times piece, household management expert Mrs. Thetta Quay Franks offers an “Efficiency Test of Domestic Standards for Every Housekeeper.” Franks expresses concerns for both the household manager and the servants she employs, culminating in the sense that it will be in the nation’s best interests if everyone understands that housekeeping “can and should be standardized” (“Household Efficiency”). Quay insists that women’s work be well managed, compensated, and respected, as the “health, strength, comfort, and happiness of the nation” depend on it (“Efficiency Test”). It is thus that much more important, she feels, that women running households do not stand for the rudeness, uncleanness, and vulgarity assumed to come along with poor immigrant help. As Mrs. Franks declares:

democracy is to blame...Our household employes [sic] come from foreign lands, where their place in the social order is fixed...But the moment they arrive in the United States they meet with the new idea that all men are created equal. They confuse freedom with license and independence with discourtesy. (“Efficiency Test”)

Her twenty-question “Test of Domestic Standards” asks women to standardize themselves and their servants, in the sense of attaining homogeny, by conforming to her detailed guidelines. The piece also exemplifies the ways in which the discourse of domestic efficiency conflated scientific standardization and nativist social standards. For Mrs. Thetta Quay encourages women to standardize their servants by bringing them up to an American standard of behavior, which importantly conflates civic literacy (the proper understanding of “freedom” and “independence”) with social uplift (the turn away from “license” and “discourtesy”).

The social dimension of domestic efficiency, however, is inextricable from the material and spatial dimensions, and it is in these dimensions that Taylorism and Fordism meet. Students in Quay’s 1916 winter courses “were satisfied that [she]...was qualified to lead” them only after seeing her carefully arranged kitchen, with its comfortably low sink, conveniently adjacent gas range, and a work table in the middle of the room from which the person ordering supplies can “see at a glance what is lacking in the glass jars” the order will refill. Her students are also impressed by the tools and appliances filling her “modern kitchen,” from the “files of bright aluminium sauce pans,” to the nicely hung curtains to the “modern steamer, which will cook an entire dinner over one gas jet” (“Household Efficiency”). Any of the material components of this “last word in kitchens” could easily have been ordered by eager pupils from the 1916 Sears catalogue, the kitchen section of which, thanks to advances in mass-production, offered everything from six-burner cast iron stoves to counter-top bread mixing contraptions (Mcudeque). Theoretically, at least, any woman anywhere in the nation could bring her kitchen into line with the standards—and the standardized trappings—of domestic efficiency, thanks to the big-scale reproduction of everything from the needed appliances to the printed materials touting the Taylorized domestic life.

Taylorism laid the foundations for the assembly-line production style that Ford perfected. Standardizing the spaces and movements of labor paved the way for standardizing and mass-producing material products of countless kinds. Ford's cars revolutionized the relationship between class and physical mobility, democratizing access to vehicles and the privileges of movement that came with them. They also revolutionized people's relationship to the spaces of private and public life, allowing for increased movement between geographical locations as well as different types of social spaces. Fordism and the new era of mass-production also transformed the production of those spaces, not only by filling them with mass-produced items but by making them with mass-produced building materials. And ultimately, in a sense, by mass-producing domestic residences themselves, as Chapter Three will explore in greater depth. In the 1890s, Sears & Roebuck, along with a handful of other companies, began selling building materials through their mail-order catalogues. By 1908, Sears was producing a catalogue devoted to selling homes themselves. The pages were filled with images, floor plans, and brief narratives about the character of each model, sometimes along with potential customization options, and consumers could purchase a "kit" of the pre-measured and -cut building materials needed for their chosen model. These models represented a range of prices that made it possible—theoretically at least—for lower as well as middle-class people to acquire affordable, attractive homes designed and constructed according to the most modern standards.

The mail-order companies weren't alone in this effort to popularize kit and/or prefabricated houses. While Sears, Alladin, and Sterling homes, among others, catered largely to conventional middle-class tastes, figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller designed modular and prefabricated houses that challenged aesthetic conventions. As opposed to the hodge-podge of traditional European and American styles Sears and others promoted, Wright

offered unadorned and ultra-functional, starkly beautiful and/or bunker-like spaces, while Fuller explored geodesic designs epitomized by the Dymaxion House, an innovative model in which the entire house would be suspended from a prefabricated central mast. As some of Fuller's admirers pointed out in a 1932 study of the future of housing in America, Fuller and others moved towards producing houses "in something the same way as the automobile" (Editors of Fortune 111), industrializing home construction such that the ideal house would ultimately be a "not a house" so much as "a Machine-For-Living" (Editors of Fortune 154) and could be affordably mass-produced as such. While their aesthetic and philosophical approaches differed greatly, designers such as Wright and Fuller also shared key goals with the mail-order giants. Whether touting avant-garde innovation or bourgeois comfort, all of these industrialized housing advocates aimed for affordability and efficiency. To the degree that they were concerned with efficiency, they aimed to reify the ideology of Taylorism into the material features of the home, thus simplifying and standardizing the operation of the American household. Insofar as they aimed for affordability, they hoped to increase access to ideal living spaces.

One way of viewing these developments is that they represent the democratization of domestic space. Whether aiming to build a utopian society, a manufacturing empire, or a little bit of each, these modernizers of domestic design alert us to the broader trend whereby technological advances reshaped the material and ideological construction of the American home by turning it into a theoretically reproducible unit. Operating in tandem with movements such as OYOH and Better Homes, the mass-production of products and spaces materialized the drive toward domestic standardization, for better or worse, by making possible the standardization, and even a kind of interchangeability, of everything from butter dishes to bungalows. Daniel Boorstin points out that not only items but larger units of social space—such as restaurants,

movie theaters, and the chain stores selling the mass-produced items—could be replicated with increasing uniformity (Fisher 66). As the kit house phenomenon demonstrates, homes were also among the types of space that could be replicated and standardized.

This proliferation of identical and interchangeable objects and spaces suggests what Philip Fisher calls “an ethos of democratic uniformity...” (66). In a nation theoretically constituted by the permission of difference, this new era in manufacturing could produce a “cultural sameness from point to point...secured not by ideology, religion, language, or culture but by the box of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes on the kitchen table” (66). One could easily tie this sense of democratic uniformity to items in public spaces as well, but I’d suggest that the Corn Flakes are no incidental example. Indeed, the question of what’s on the kitchen table—not to mention how many other kitchens might contain an exact copy of that table—signals the way in which the large-scale dynamics of the national shift to Fordist mass-production take form in the trappings of the consumer-citizen’s private life. And thus, it signals the degree to which the material details and routines of daily life register large-scale economic forces, which of course are also tied to large-scale political forces.

Home of the Brave: The Space of Dilemmatic Democracy

“If home is to be a positive force in politics, it must itself be recast in coalitional terms as the site of necessary, nurturing, but also strategic, conflicted, and temporary alliances.” —Honig (269)

“We’ve traced the call! It’s coming from inside the house!” —When A Stranger Calls

Fisher accounts for this relationship between mass-production and domestic space in identifying “the creation of democratic social space,” primarily through the means of mass-manufacturing, as a solution to the problem of American identity. He locates the problem in the conceptual difficulty of reconciling the nation’s many kinds of diversity—not only racial and

ethnic, for instance, but geographical, cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.—with any coherent sense of national identity. In Fisher’s view, this dilemma takes on particular significance in the late 19th century, when America was becoming one of the world’s most powerful nations despite its own internal dissonances. In regards to both American land and character, creating a unified civic and cultural entity out of a nation of immigrants required a widespread “erasure rather than cultivation of features” (Fisher 64). A coherent notion of American culture—insofar as such a thing has ever been achieved—came about through the “thousands of negations” immigrants performed, or were regularly pressured to perform, regarding their own ethnic particularity (63).

In Fisher’s view, individual acts of negating difference were only one piece of the puzzle. Personal processes of homogenization happened in a geo-spatial framework. Conceptually, at least, political equalization could be achieved through the politically-minded mapping of national space. Fisher views the developing vision of ideal democratic space on a continuum from Jefferson’s Cartesian vision of national geography to the rise of mass-production and ultimately the creation of a modern nation of theoretically identical suburbs, full of identical houses, full of identical products. Fisher locates the Cartesian character of ideal democratic space in the same Land Ordinance of 1785 Luken and Vaughan describe as critical to the shift from the Jeffersonian ideal to the suburban. Fisher more fully emphasizes its spatial logic, however, highlighting the way in which it organized the geographical future nation into subdividable one-mile-square sections that could also be multiplied to determine state borders.

This “mechanical grid” (Fisher 64) masks, in a sense, the unwieldy variation of the nation’s actual geography, ignoring topographical and cultural boundaries alike in favor of a conceptual uniformity of the land and its inhabitants. This geo-political homogenization then helped to conceptually contain not only the geographical but the cultural diversity that threatened

national unity. The mapping was conducted, no less, for the sake of future homesteading activities that also aided the very tangible suppression of the cultural differences previously sustained in part by the material variation of the “frontier” landscape, the mountains and rivers that played an important role in human movements, alliances, and so on.

More importantly even than Jefferson’s literal map, the conceptual division and homogenization of the land prompted the “progressive definition and realization of a democratic social space,” units of which are “identical point to point and potentially unlimited in extent” (64). This notion of space, Fisher suggests, is essential to democratic society because it grounds an idea of equal representation:

Representation, of course, also implies an identity from point to point so that one part can stand for or represent the whole. Democratic social space would, ideally, be a universal and everywhere similar medium in which rights and opportunities are identical, a space in which the right and even ability to move from place to place is assured. (64)

As geographical and civic units were, in a sense, one and the same in the Jeffersonian scheme of constituent citizen-farmers, political subjectivity was tied to the land and vice versa. Just as the homogenizing mechanical grid allowed for a system of political representation, this conceptual erasure of geographical differences, point to point, facilitated the conceptual erasure of cultural difference and thus conceptually enabled the social and political equality of individual citizens.

These are the stakes, then, of “the box of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes on the kitchen table” (66). As Fisher argues, over the hundred and fifty years following the Land Ordinance of 1785, an ongoing “ethos of uniformity” would be enacted in a new way as mass-production enabled the large-scale replication of types of spaces and the material objects that filled them. Ultimately,

however, Fisher identifies this vision of ideal democratic space in order to compare it to the “actual, damaged social space within which American experience and American representation took place” (62), considering slavery and its representation in the American novel as the ultimate challenge to the conceptual solution democratic social space offered. For, of course, mechanical grid or no, each square mile of the nation is different. McMansion craze or no, the built landscape sustains a tremendous variety of floor plans and housing styles. There is an unmistakable appeal to stories—whether they turn out to be truthful or the stuff of sub/urban legend—of people who live in subdivisions walking blithely into neighbors’ homes they’ve mistaken for their own. Realistically, however, there are many who live in unmistakable homes, many of which are quite different from the single-family bungalow-and-yard of the Own-Your-Own-Home campaign ilk. And of course, even those who do live in similar spaces may have wildly different ways of understanding and interacting with those spaces. Their domiciles may be carbon copies, but their domesticities are distinct.

Fisher rightly points out the fact that, compared to ideal democratic social space, the actual space of American experience is severely damaged, dangerously disjointed, a fact that 19th-century American authors such as Whitman and Emerson grappled with through their complex negotiations of space, representation, and democratic inclusion. In thinking about literary treatments of this discrepancy between ideal and damaged democratic social space—and more particularly still, of how this discrepancy informs the experience of “home” in American life and literature—it is useful to consider Bonnie Honig’s understanding of democracy and difference. Insofar as Fisher’s goal is to “explore the relation of...democratic social space to the actual, damaged social space within which American experience and American representation took place” (62), Fisher not only points out a discrepancy but sets up a dichotomy between

democratic social space, from which difference is necessarily evacuated, and damaged social space, in which unavoidable, unsubtracted difference is evident and the failures of democratic inclusion are exposed. If equality is based on an idea of sameness, damaged social space is characterized by the visibility of difference in the sense of inequality. As he is referring more particularly to slavery and its social and political consequences, civic and racial difference go hand in hand. Representing difference, in this scheme, means representing the damaging of democratic social space.

Honig, on the other hand, describes difference in a way that stakes out a path between the poles of this dichotomy. Her essay titled “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home” argues that the conflicts produced by difference are essential to the operation of democracy. She points out that while the word “difference” is often meant to be interchangeable with “diversity” or “pluralism,” recent feminist and political theory

suggests that difference is not simply a different identity...; it is also that which resists or exceeds the closure of identity. It signals not a difference *from* others but a difference that troubles identity from *within* its would-be economy of the same. Difference is what identity perpetually seeks (and fails) to expunge, fix, or hold in place. In short, difference is a problem for identity, not one of its adjectives. (257)

Seeing difference in this way complicates even the possibility, for instance, of reformers encouraging immigrants to erase signs of their ethnic difference in order to be successfully “Americanized,” a goal Honig’s approach suggests is neither worthy nor possible. At the same time, embracing “diversity” as it is often understood is equally impossible. For both attitudes require identity—whether of an individual or of a social group—to be fixed and monolithic,

when in fact identity is constituted by constant change and internal contradictions.

More importantly still, the turbulence inherent in this unstable state, in Honig's view, is not the enemy of democracy but its necessary precondition. Taking difference seriously, Honig suggests, requires us to rethink the work of democratic theory such that it is not merely about negotiating the needs of different groups in hopes of safely containing that social or political turbulence, violent though it may be. Rather, we must recognize conflict and resistance as "ineradicab[le]" (258), as intrinsic to the project of creating socio-political order. Indeed, we must understand that such conflict is natural and necessary to democracy because it is inherent in moral subjectivity. Furthermore, inclusion and exclusion being mutually constitutive, such conflict signals the processes by which people fight the oppression and marginalization and manage the clash of values inherent to creating democratic "inclusion" and "unity."

Nonetheless, as Honig notes, many seek refuge from such struggle by turning to the concept of "home"—whether referring to the private household or the larger construct of the home as nation, or, for that matter, other sustaining conceptual spaces or communities—because "home" is often defined *by* its removal from various kinds of danger and discomfort. This concept of the home as the refuge from strife also sustains projections of all internal conflict (within the self or within groups) onto those perceived as "Other," whether within or outside of national bounds ("Difference, Dilemmas" 270). Thus, Honig argues, taking difference seriously in democratic theory requires us to "give up on the dream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict, and struggle, a place—an identity, a form of life, a group vision—unmarked or unriven by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place" (258).

She does not suggest, however, that all this means we must give up on home or

democracy all together. Rather, we must accept that difference and/or conflict necessarily constitute the spaces of both (as well as the spaces “outside” them), and only by working openly in the accepted context of the resulting difficulty can we find any measure of protection or progress. “To resignify home as a coalitional arrangement”—that is, a space of unsteady, ever-shifting, and even dangerous, but productive alliances—“and to accept the impossibility of the conventional home’s promised safety from conflict, dilemmas, and difference is not to reject home but to recover it for the sake of an alternative, future practice of politics” (270). Home, then, is the space of encounter with the difficulties of both internal and external conflict, and only by recognizing it as such can we make progress in the endless but necessary struggle toward true equality. Honig emphasizes the fact that this is true on many levels—from the metaphorical home that is the intimate space of interior subjectivity, to the literal household one inhabits, to the national home invoked in conceptions of the foreign versus the “domestic.”

Honig’s discussion of the home, while partly metaphorical, also grounds her treatment of these dynamics as spatial phenomena. While Fisher poses ideal democratic social space against the damaged social space of unreconciled difference, Honig suggests that we think of the space of democratic progress as a “a dilemmatic space” defined by the constancy of a difficult but essential negotiation between the unreconcilable needs, values, and identifications of moral subjects. Honig identifies “dilemmas” not as externally-imposed, episodic conflicts between “mutually exclusive alternatives,” but rather the “periodic crystallizations of incoherences and conflicts in social orders and their subjects,” of “a turbulence that is always already there” (259). The individual subject is

positioned on multiple, conflictual axes of identity/difference such that her agency itself is constituted, even enabled—and not simply paralyzed—by daily

dilemmatic choices and negotiations. The perspectives of this subject suggest that we ought not to think only in terms of dilemmas as discrete events onto which unitary agents with diverse commitments stumble occasionally...but perhaps also in terms of a dilemmatic space or spaces that both constitute us and form the terrain of our existence. (259)

The “terrain of our existence” can be understood as conceptual, referring to an “imagined community” in Anderson’s sense, for instance, or to any conceptual framework within which one defines oneself. It also has a quite literal dimension, though, applying easily to the spatial framework one considers “home,” whether referring to a household space, a neighborhood, a region, or a nation.

Conventionally, one might consider it ideal not only to call such spaces home but to feel “at home” in them—to consider them the refuge from conflict. As Honig argues, however, these literal, material spaces must be resignified as conflictual and coalitional in order to allow for a more honest, socially just, and productive experience of selfhood and difference (indeed, of selfhood *as* the constant negotiation of the difference within). Re-imagining the nature of “home” in a way that accepts this kind of difference as internally constitutive rather than externally imposed would reverse the tendency to project difference onto others one can then exclude—whether ideologically or materially and even violently.

Both Honig and Fisher point out ways in which happy, homogeneous households are imagined to represent the ideal state of the nation as home: Fisher by identifying the large-scale replication and stocking of suburban homes as embodying a spatial ideal of Cartesian, democratic equality in the age of mass-production, while Honig gestures toward the yearning to find a solution in “the consolidation of new and improved homes that claim really to deliver on

the dream” of peaceful refuge (Honig 272). By reading Fisher’s identification of the dream of ideal democratic space through Honig’s re-conception of ideal democracy as inherently “dilemmatic,” we can develop a new spatial model that considers ideal democratic space to be characterized by the representation of dilemmatic negotiation. Ideal democratic space, thought of in this way, would not be evacuated of embodied particularity or characterized by the peace and purity of theoretical equality. Rather, it would be recognized as the appropriate locus of the clashing, irreducible moral investments that will always exist within and between individuals and social groups. Such a concept requires democratic courage: the will to continually acknowledge such conflict in order to genuinely work towards a more perfect realization of the nation’s worthy ideals. Such a concept draws attention, then, to the importance of cultural productions that do the work of representing conflict of this sort, thus making it that much more possible to acknowledge and address it.

That is, if we recognize dilemmatic space *as* ideal democratic space, we can see how the representation of domestic dilemmas—interior to the self, to the home, to the nation—can be essential to the democratic process. And further, we can see how the investment in exploring such issues, shared across varied aesthetic categories, gives shape to a continuing, if perhaps transforming, domestic fiction tradition in American literature of the early 20th century. Certainly, representing conflict within and between individuals and groups can have aesthetic and even sensational appeal whether or not it involves any authorial democratic aims. Thinking about “home” as the space of dilemmatic democracy, however, foregrounds the question of how, when authors and artists portray the home as ground zero for negotiating interior, interpersonal, and even explicitly civic dilemmas, they are actively staging the intricate and intimate daily operations of the democratic process.

When Faulkner portrays, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, for instance, the construction and destruction of an individual household and the family line it was meant to sustain, he portrays the ways in which the racial politics of the nation shape the most intimate spaces of family life, and vice versa. The instability of his narrative, like the instability of the household it illustrates, seems to connote at once catastrophe and liberatory possibility, because it *does*—because that tender and ever-shifting balance is inherent, as Honig suggests, to ongoing national negotiations between conflicting moral positions. Faulkner portrays, in many ways, the opposite of democracy, the racial oppressions and seemingly irreconcilable differences (in both Fisher and Honig’s senses) that precipitated the Civil War and persisted well beyond it. In the novel, that dark vision is importantly mapped onto the “terrain of our existence” that is the family home. The act of representation, however, is what brings the democracy to the dilemma of the space Faulkner portrays.

Not just Faulkner but all of the authors discussed here, among many others, offer a vision of home as dilemmatic space, the space of conflicts and negotiations that have civic as well as personal and aesthetic dimensions. When Barnes articulates the contest of belonging in *Ryder*’s crowded family cabin, she demonstrates both how nativist politics might determine a given family’s sleeping arrangements and how bedroom politics certainly determine the future constitution of the civic body. When Claude McKay sets his *Home to Harlem* protagonist on an apparently never-ending quest for political and personal safe haven, he tests the very notion of seeing the variability of potential “home” spaces as modeling the intellectual suppleness needed to work towards building a nation in which difference and equality can mutually define the space of belonging. When Bessie Smith sings about leaving a home or attaining one, she offers a vision of domestic experience—in one’s own house and in the larger community constituted by a nation

full of socially varied, individually-operated households—in which the protection of individual agency is more important than the proper performance of one's place in entrenched social hierarchies.

Nor is Faulkner alone in pairing the investigation of non-standard domesticity with the deployment of non-standard narrative technique. In each of the works examined here—from Faulkner's contradictory histories, to Barnes' vintage aesthetic sampler, to McKay's narrative tug of war between protagonists and their intellectual frameworks, to Smith's lyrical and technological moves across geographical and cultural space—aesthetic strategies pair with representations of varied domesticities to unsettle the audience in one way or another. These tactics, in a sense, link the dilemmatic space of the home and nation to the dilemmatic space of narrative, in which the timeless phenomenon of conflicting investments and identifications animates the distinctively fragmented perspectives of modernist—and otherwise modern—narrative expression.

These representations of the lived, perceived experience of domestic life denaturalize the mythology that has grown up around it. They emphatically pry open questions which narrow visions of ideal domestic life work to shut down. The dilemmatic spaces of the home and the text may be unsettled and often, unsettling. They are nonetheless the spaces in which we must dwell and through which we must navigate toward whatever clarity or refuge might be found. As the authors in this study demonstrate, one way *not* to achieve a sustainable, healthy sort of domesticity—as individuals and as citizens—is by striving toward a static and narrow ideal. Some authors show the consequences of too close adherence. Some point out that being unable to get anywhere near it has its own problems. All show that being at home means constantly negotiating what it means to be there, what it means to leave, how to arrange the most intimate

material and conceptual frameworks we inhabit. All do so by representing the true variation in ideal and actual ways of relating to home space that reductive models of proper domesticity work to suppress.

Upon closer attention to these varied texts, we can see how they are affiliated—appropriately enough, not tidily, but powerfully—in modeling dilemmatic democratic space. As each of the following chapters of this dissertation will demonstrate, the authors and artists studied here, among others in their period, take the important stance of describing the space of the home as the space of negotiating clashing interior (to the individual) and exterior (between individuals) investments that have broad implications for our understanding of what both the private and national “home” is, can, and should be. They take on what Honig considers the dangerous “phantasmatic imaginary of the home” [270] and show it for the myth of refuge it truly is and, for the sake of not only ideal but actual democratic practice, must be. Furthermore, since the particular contours of that dream of home are mapped in exquisite detail by the discourse of domestic standardization onto the dream homes of the early 20th century, it is possible to read authorial portrayals of home and domesticity directly against the reductive models with which they and their contemporaries were being bombarded. Reading varied works against the general background of these shared stakes and the particular contexts most relevant to each text, the following discussion will thus provide a series of in-depth considerations of how narrative portrayals of domesticity prove essential to the exploration of democratic possibility in early 20th-century American life and literature.

Notes

¹ For a full discussion, see Janet Hutchison, Chapter Four: “Shaping Housing and Enhancing Consumption: Hoover’s Interwar Housing Policy,” in Bauman et. al.’s *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. Hutchison notes that the later association of Hoover with Depression-Era “Hooverilles,” as well as the government’s retreat from active development of housing policy during the 1920s, has overshadowed Hoover’s earlier involvement in housing policy. She outlines his commitment to facilitating homeownership and promoting it as a key expression of patriotism, and she demonstrates how his “widespread endorsement of housing organizations and the suburban ideal increased state entry into private homes and sanctioned consumption” (96), paving the way for future federal forays into housing policies and the domestic lives of citizens.

² Hoffschwelle argues, above all, that “the history of progressive reform in the rural South is a more complex story than the imposition of middle-class standards on rural households” and that both black and white “southern country women negotiated their own entry into the middle-class consumer culture of 1920s America” by tailoring domestic material culture to their own needs and sensibilities (51).

³ Perhaps it goes without saying, but the Oxford English Dictionary identifies “home” as descending from Old English, Dutch, and Germanic forms of words that describe dwelling places in the same sense, while the “homo-” in “homogeneous” comes from the Greek “homos,” or same. The homophonic resonance is a coincidence, but a poignant one (Holden).

Chapter Two

“Their Only Treason”: Domestic Space and National Belonging in Djuna Barnes’ *Ryder*

It is perhaps no coincidence that the title character of Djuna Barnes’ *Ryder* is born in 1865, the year that answered Lincoln’s question about the American house divided. Ryder joins the world along with the newly united “house” of America, which, in the wake of the Civil War, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment, would now be standing as “all one thing, or all another.” Barnes links Ryder’s birth to a defining moment in the American history of racial struggle, and thus she links him to the nation’s long history of grappling with the most basic ideals of inclusion that fueled its founding and yet plagued its practice from the beginning. Along with the trope of the house as a figure for the nation, these questions about identity and inclusion have evolved but remain central to Americans’ efforts to understand and represent themselves and their home, efforts which are a vital part of American literary and critical traditions. For the national endeavor to align its principles and practices of inclusion continues, of course, and continues to be expressed both in the nation’s ways of sanctioning (or prohibiting) the composition of individual households and in cultural productions that explore the politics and particulars of domestic life.

Despite its rich commentary on issues of inclusion and democratic possibility, among others, *Ryder* has weathered a long trend of critical dismissal.¹ Even in aiming to recuperate Barnes’ work in the 1970s, for instance, Louis Kannenstine had acknowledged *Ryder*’s modernist features,² but only to ultimately find *Ryder* missing overall “a single grand coordinating principle like Joyce’s intention to record simultaneous levels of human consciousness in their interaction with the subconscious” (49). Dismissals of *Ryder* have also often been tied to the sense that the novel is essentially a biographical rather than aesthetic

project.³ As many have demonstrated, *Ryder* conveys a fictional polygamous family history that bears striking—if often mystified—resemblance to Barnes’ own experience. Many have seen its stylistic maze as mere frivolity or as her strategy of simultaneously sensationalizing and veiling family scandal.

More recently, beginning largely with a spate of feminist re-readings in the nineties, critics have taken not only Barnes but *Ryder* more seriously, identifying its stylistic play of revelation and obfuscation as the very organizing principle earlier readers had found lacking. Bonnie Kime Scott’s influential 1995 *Refiguring Modernism*, for instance, offers a revised genealogy of modernism that brings the “women of 1928” to the forefront alongside the long-celebrated “men of 1914” and discusses *Ryder* in some depth. In this discussion, I would like to join with her and others treating *Ryder* along these lines, seeing Barnes’ resistance of easily recognizable grand coordinating principles as, indeed, part of her object. Such reclamations align as well with readings that privilege rather than undermine the biographical element of the novel. In particular, more recent critics have productively seen the text’s convolutions as indicating a submerged narrative of sexual violation that may represent Barnes’ own experience through the figure of Julie.⁴ For all the work done by such readings, however, the insistence on Barnes’ personal experience sometimes forecloses attention to other issues. I would suggest that we can see still further unified purpose in the text by reading its more commonly recognized sexual and familial politics against a largely overlooked context—that of the geographical, cultural, and political settings in which Barnes set her narrative and in which it was published: the northeastern United States of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, respectively.⁵ Read through this lens, *Ryder* seems less concerned with encoding Barnes’ family life and more concerned with foregrounding the concept of family as a social, historical, and narrative phenomenon.

An exception to the trend of contextual dissociation is Susan Edmunds' *Grotesque Relations*, which reads *Ryder* against the rise of the U.S. welfare state. Rather than seeing the details of the Ryder family's sexual practices as the substance for which all else is cipher, she sees these structuring family dynamics as inextricable from a narrative about a different family unit: the American national family as conceived in the political and cultural imagination of the 1920s. Responding to the recent line of criticism coming out of Michael Szalay's work on New Deal modernism, Edmunds proposes a notion of modernist domestic fiction in which writers re-deploy and invert nineteenth-century discourses of sentimental domesticity. In such works, "the space of domesticity is repeatedly turned inside out" (*Grotesque* 5). She reads *Ryder* in particular as staging the transition from older to newer reform ideologies, arguing that it resists attempts to blame "social horror" on "lone individuals whose practices fail to conform to the current terms of the state's domestic agenda" and rather critiques "the wider, structural impediments to female autonomy, which invalidated the maternalist promise of domestic security at the very moment of its issuance" (*Grotesque* 63). As Edmunds demonstrates, *Ryder* ultimately critiques the U.S. welfare state's "selective promise of domestic security" and the degree to which it demands female helplessness as the cost of what security it offers (*Grotesque* 63).

I build on Edmunds' argument by considering further ways in which *Ryder*'s interweaving of familial, sexual, and civic politics protests the American state's selective promises. *Ryder* exposes not only the sexist contradictions of the welfare infrastructure, but more generally, the nation's incapacity to fully incorporate marginalized and disenfranchised groups into its social and civic structures. Further, it foregrounds the role of the family home in that uneven incorporation. As closer attention to *Ryder* reveals, Barnes deploys domestic tropes and figures in order to question whom and what the individual and national home can ultimately

accommodate. I do not dispute that she critiques the welfare state's disenfranchising gender politics, I would add that Barnes' brand of domestic grotesquery specifically draws attention to the ways in which political and social modernization—whether figured as the rise of the welfare state or otherwise—required the consolidation of the American family and household in a very particular way. By turning the domestic inside out, Barnes stages the effects of the early 20th-century cultural drive—by forces such as government organizations, reform groups, and mass-print media—to promote a very specific, narrow model of the normative American household: that of a detached bungalow with yard, housing a monogamous, Christian, heterosexual and preferably single-race, child-producing family. She also draws attention to the ways in which such entities pushed to directly link that household model to ideals of citizenship and belonging.

As this project argues, Barnes is one of a number of authors in the early 20th century whose work complicated this drive. Even so, *Ryder* stands out for the degree to which it amplifies themes of family and household constitution by drawing attention to the literal and figurative terms of domestic accommodation, or rather, to the question of who can be considered to “legitimately” belong in such material spaces. In this text, Barnes exhibits the processes of legitimation and consolidation of a particular model of domestic life that reigned in the mid- to late-19th century and carried through into the 20th century, processes which greatly influenced not only individuals' experiences of their own “private” home lives but the capacity of private domestic life to shape one's belonging in the broader “home” of the nation. Barnes does this, primarily, by representing bids for various kinds of legitimacy within a non-normative family as it struggles against the pressure to conform to a monogamous model as manifested in increasing surveillance and potential discipline from public authorities.

The family in question is that of Wendell Ryder, a polygamist living with his mother

Sophia, his two partners, and their children in a small cabin and then on a farm in a smaller town outside New York City. It often focuses as well on Sophia, who orchestrates much of Ryder's family life, and on his "legitimate" daughter Julie. Barnes frequently dwells on the perspectives of Ryder's two "wives," the first and legally married wife Amelia, and the second partner, Kate, who begins as a mistress and comes to be installed in the family as a second wife figure. Ryder has children with both. The text relates the escalating conflict between the two family lines as well as the increasing pressures of censure from outside forces ranging from neighbors to agents of the state, pressures which push the family to the precipice of the decision Ryder feels he must make between Amelia and Kate. While the novel traces the family's formation and ultimate dissolution, noticing Ryder's other dalliances along the way, these arguably primary events are submerged in a compilation of thematically and aesthetically digressive chapters that would make Shandy proud. These segments include everything from pseudo-religious manifestos to Old English-esque bawdy tales to comments from the neighborly peanut gallery to lamentations over the mortal threat of childbirth to meditations on the nature of reading and identity formation. They are variously voiced, featuring different characters more and less central to the "plot" and frequently ventriloquizing varied (though primarily white, Western) historical authors and literary styles—from Chaucer to Whitman, from the Bible to 19th-century sentimental fiction, with perhaps an extra emphasis throughout on Robert Burton's 1621 satirical and scientific tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.⁶ It is a complex family's complex tale.

By putting such a "non-traditional" family model on display, and by describing it in such an unusual way, Barnes accomplishes two critical things. First, she denaturalizes the "traditional" household itself, signaling instead the actual and often disregarded—or actively obscured—American history of varied domestic arrangements and practices. As Nancy Cott

demonstrates in *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, the enduring prevalence in the U.S. of the Christian model of marriage as a monogamous, life-long, child-producing partnership should by no means be taken for granted as either “natural” or inevitable. Christian monogamists were in the global minority at the time of the nation’s founding, and while American founding thinkers clearly considered their own marital practices superior, their preferences did not simply prevail over other cultural influences (Cott 9). Rather, as Cott demonstrates, colonial secular authorities, as well as later political leaders, persistently promoted and policed the Christian, monogamous model settlers had brought with them. They wove their values into the fabric of the state, making it a matter of policy to incentivize certain kinds of unions and families and directly criminalize or more subtly punish or dismiss others (4).⁷ Throughout the study, Cott stresses the degree to which, despite persistent understandings of marriage and household as “private” realms, the construction and regulation of domestic life has long been and continues to be a matter of public authority in various forms. Overall, neither the heterosexual, monogamous, child-producing, long-term, and often intra-racial model of domestic arrangement, nor the state’s (often invisible) role in policing that model, should be understood as inherently correct, inevitable, “natural,” or essentially American. These conditions are only “traditional” insofar as a group of people worked actively, over a long period of time—including the cultural moments of *Ryder*’s events and composition—to make them the norm.

In light of *Ryder*’s family arrangements, it is important to note that polygamy was a particular concern within this national process of domestic management. As conflicts over slavery and states’ rights heated up through the mid-19th century, and as settlers moved unincorporated lands towards statehood, political authorities were deeply troubled by the expanding population of Mormons in the area that would become Utah. Political and religious

leaders considered Mormon polygamists a particular threat to not only the nation's moral health but to the existential "integrity of the United States" (Cott 73). Their concern stemmed largely from the idea that a Christian model of monogamous marriage expressed the exact ideals of contractual consent essential to the founding principles of American governance.⁸ Polygamy, on the other hand, they considered despotic, misogynist, primitive, and essentially foreign. Popular literature registered and reinforced these views, equating "polygamy with political tyranny, moral infamy, lawlessness, and men's abuse of women; monogamy in contrast represented the national morality and lawful authority" (Cott 73). Fear and hatred of polygamists was further fueled by politicians conflating polygamy and slavery as "twin relics of barbarism" for their mutual deviance from the proper performance of the "domestic institution" of marriage (Cott 73).⁹ The fact that controversies over both issues were tied to questions about national versus state governance highlighted as well Mormonism's broader threat. As a rising state, Mormon Utah's growing political power tied its non-standard marriage model to the threat of political rebellion and national instability in a society already charging towards the chaos of Civil War.

Following the war—and thus in the time of Ryder's raising—monogamy's status as the law of the land required another round of bolstering in postbellum America. The war had severely unsettled ways of life, emancipation had introduced questions of how to recognize slaves' previously informal or unrecognized unions, "[c]ommunitarian and free love alternatives had bedeviled the institution in the 1850s," and changes in the legislation of divorce and the management of women's property had shown matrimonial law to be changeable (Cott 105). In this context, Barnes' insistence on representing the "private" domestic experience of a polygamous family—indeed, perhaps, the private experience of her *own* family—takes on even greater social and political significance. Writing about this late 19th-century setting from the

vantage point of the 1920s, Barnes had important perspective on the ways in which the long-standing variation in American domestic life was being even further standardized in her time to match the nuclear family model so commonly understood as “normal” or “traditional” today.¹⁰

Ryder builds a family representing more than one kind of variation. Not only does he practice polygamy and espouse utopian free love philosophies, but, as I will argue, his family represents inter- ethnic and -racial coupling, a phenomenon that distressed many proponents of Christian monogamous marriage in Ryder’s (and *Ryder*’s) time as much as polygamy might. Indeed, as Cott points out, polygamy was construed as primitive, foreign, and inherently nonwhite, and thus was to some extent automatically racialized (4). As Barnes was writing in 1929, the long history of delegitimizing non-monogamous, inter-racial, and otherwise non-standard marriages—indeed, the construction of Christian monogamous marriages *as* standard—had taken a new form in 1920s immigration legislations, such as the Immigration and Asian Exclusion Acts of 1924,¹¹ that actively managed the legal composition of American families and, by extension, the polity they composed. The new extremes of exclusion represented by these laws illuminate a second critical way in which Barnes denaturalizes the construction of “traditional” (monogamous, long-term, single-race, child-producing) domestic life in the U.S.: she portrays not only an instance of familial difference but a larger trajectory of domestic modeling and containment. As the polygamous Ryder family is about to be divided and condensed into a monogamous family at the end of the novel, we could see the text as staging the paring down of the archetype itself between the mid-19th and early-20th centuries. It displays the cultural drive—not incidentally gaining momentum alongside the eugenics movement and related discourses of standardization—to expunge any remaining deviance from both the individual family unit and the national family it emblemizes.

Barnes signals this analogy between the Ryders' domestic arrangements and the demographic constitution of the "home" space of the nation through the material domestic space in which the Ryders live. In portraying that space's material as well as social configuration, Barnes creates tension between the late 19th-century Progressive Era context in which the narrative plays out and the early 20th-century context in which it is written. The Ryders' initial domestic space, a small cabin in a semi-rural area, provides at first glance nothing more than a backdrop to the text's emotional and aesthetic puzzles. I will suggest, however, that their homes—and in particular the tiny cabin Ryder first crowds with his dual family trajectories—in fact invoke the space of urban tenements, the reform of which was a matter of great concern to Progressives who were worried about the physical and moral health of both the largely immigrant population living in such spaces and the nation they increasingly populated.

This resonance between the Ryder homes and urban tenements is quite suggestive in itself, but to fully gauge its importance, it is essential to read it as well against notions of ideal housing in the 1920s context in which Barnes was writing, as represented by social and political movements such as the Own Your Own Home campaigns, Better Homes in America organizations, and other explicit, ongoing efforts to reform the domestic spaces and practices of the immigrant poor among others. Not only families but their material living spaces were being regulated in more and less obvious ways in Barnes' time. Indeed, as the Ryders' experience suggests, the regulation of social and spatial household configurations works in tandem. By considering *Ryder* in relation to the discourse of ideal housing in Barnes' time, we can see how her portrayal of domestic space works to complicate that discourse in two key ways. First, it highlights the distance between the discourse's normative American family and an instance of actual household life quite unlike the model. Second, it confounds the easy correlation the

housing discourse constructed between ideal domestic spaces and full social and civic belonging.

Ultimately, it does not seem that Barnes proposes polygamy in close quarters as a preferable model. More to the point, she seems to suggest that the exhausting, wonderful, confusing, delightful, unsettling particularity of human experience—not to mention the unpredictable, irreducible features of the shifting social terrain of a nation undergoing large-scale demographic changes—prevents the possibility of constructing a blueprint for belonging that could apply universally. Instead of the individual and national home constituting a simplified space of rest and peace, she presents it as a place of constant conflict, negotiation, and questioning. She highlights instead the essential point that, ideals of inclusion being nice as far they go, the actual experience of trying to belong—whether in a rustic woodland cabin or a national community—is for many a constant and often failing endeavor. And thus she suggests that improving the chances of shared belonging depends on honest, messy, continual engagement with the conflicting values and needs involved in the quest for inclusion. That is, Barnes presents home space as *dilemmatic* in Bonnie Honig's sense. She seems to suggest, even, that for better and worse, these domestic dilemmas are built into the very foundations of American life.

“Be She What”—or Where—“She May”: A Notion of Locational Legitimacy

In the veritable chaos of *Ryder*, the stakes of domestic belonging are high, and questions about the implications of one's domicile run steadily throughout the novel's many and varied concerns. The degree to which these questions permeate the text becomes clear when we consider the significance of even one of its briefest, most tangential accounts of a unique kind of domestic space. That is, when Ryder constructs a primitive mobile home in order to go get the mail, it's one among so many unusual actions on his part that it might seem, at first, hardly to

bear mentioning. The reader only hears of it in a letter from Amelia Ryder's sister Ann back in England, in which she writes:

Now who ever heard that it was comely or fitting to put the kitchen-range
into a haywagon, and surround it with what was well enough as a tent,
merely to go riding for the mails, and so, in outlandish manner, keep
himself from the justice of the frost? (71)

Barnes has essentially described a crude version of the "Covered Wagon," one of the first modern mobile homes starting to be mass-marketed in the late 1920s. Though the formal version was surely unknown to Ryder's Progressive Era contemporaries, Barnes' readers might have encountered one.¹² Ushering in the mass-production of touring vehicles, these early models deliberately figure the independent mobility of modern autotourism as an expression of traditional, foundational American pioneering. Ryder's version could not rival the modern one in regards to speed, convenience, or comfort, but it makes mobile some of both the literal and conceptual comforts of home, thus participating in an unfolding history of American mobile domesticity along with "covered wagons" old and new. And it does so, importantly, just at the moment when mass-production was making such mobile domesticity available to a wide variety of people—including Barnes' readers—in a new way.¹³ Though a brief tangent in the narrative, this domestic innovation signals Barnes' concern with the question of just what home spaces can and should be—what makes them nurturing, or liberating, or, for that matter, unnatural. It also importantly, if briefly, embodies the trend of domestic movement hinted at in later suggestions that the family gets accustomed, for a time, to moving regularly from one home to another when faced with a payment they cannot afford.

Ryder's mail-wagon action is problematic—surely the kitchen-range would be unwieldy

and pose a serious fire hazard.¹⁴ It is only fitting, as Ryder's first memory is of playing with matches and, as a result, burning down his house (17). Barnes quickly establishes, then, that Ryder's domestic experiments may have at once inspiring and incendiary consequences.¹⁵ Though Ryder's purpose is somewhat banal, Ann rightly draws the attention to the innovation itself and notably identifies it as specifically American, describing it as an "outlandish" act and thus associating it with what she calls "America, that outlandish country!" (43). What shocks Ann is not the construction itself but the perversion of the natural that it represents. Identifying the frost as "just," she poses a scheme in which the discomforts of the natural are a fair punishment and the benefits of renovating the conceptual limits of home constitute evasion. Ryder's creativity here aligns with his approach to other features of domestic arrangement as well. Far from accepting the cold restrictions of societal norms for home life, he integrates the "heats" (169) of his mistress Kate into his household, maintaining her and their children as full-time occupants.

Just as installing an unpredictable heating element in a haywagon might, installing Kate in the Ryder household turns out to be an inflammatory action. Indeed, the significance of Ryder's innovations only becomes clear when we examine the experimental polygamous household he attempts and fails to sustain over the course of the novel. Not only Ryder's mobile home mail wagon but his residences themselves encourage the reader to dwell, as it were, on questions of dwelling, and in particular, on dwelling as a matter of gate-keeping. In one of Ann's letters, she asks whether it's true that Amelia's (Saxon-American) son Timothy "has taken up with a half-wit, white-haired Polish Lena, who lies at all hours beside the roadway in the underbrush for fouling of him?" (152). Ann's panicked imaginings here encapsulate the sense of threatened ethnic encroachment that permeates the novel and, I would argue, animates the rising

crisis of accommodation in the little Ryder cabin in the woods. The Ryders' domestic space, fundamentally, is crowded. It ultimately cannot accommodate the two family lines filling it or, for that matter, the ideology that structures their living arrangements. The resulting tension builds with the building of the Ryder family. It begins in the first of the Ryder homes we see and the only one Barnes describes in detail: the small cabin into which Ryder brings Kate to live with himself, his mother, his wife Amelia, and his two children. They eventually move to the "farm, called Bull's-Ease" (128), which is presumably a larger space. Notably, Barnes does not outline its dimensions and features in detail as she does the cabin's, and she is even more vague on the subject and timing of the family's "much moving about the country" between residences, suggesting only that a further move might occur when "the mortgage...fell due" (128). As the number of Ryder children increases from two to eight over this time, however, it is clear that due to the larger number of people residing in the larger space, the problems of over-crowding escalate as the Ryders' square footage expands.¹⁶ This persistent tension directs us to a larger cultural failure of accommodation—or, perhaps, a cultural insistence on gate-keeping and thus exclusion of unwanted residents—that I would argue Barnes invokes throughout the text by characterizing Amelia and Kate as immigrant figures in crowded quarters.

It is not only the Ryder households but *Ryder* itself that is crowded in a way that has intrigued and befuddled readers since its publication in 1929. The text is crowded with characters, relationships, tangential narratives, perspectives, images, vague but suggestive allusions, narrative forms and styles, and soliloquies of one kind or another. Both aesthetically and materially, the households at its center seem to experience a crisis of accommodation. In the midst of this crisis, however, the house itself becomes key to a notion of legitimacy that helps parse the individuals overflowing the space's material and ideological bounds. Ultimately,

Barnes does not simply address marital or parental “legitimacy,” each of which are prominently worried over elsewhere in the text and its criticism. Rather, Barnes figures here a “legitimacy” based on one’s material domesticity. It suggests that one’s material relation to domestic space can determine one’s social position, rather than the inverse. The text explores this idea in relation to the material space of an individual family home, and further, it raises the question of how to read the Ryders’ attitudes about the spatial production of domestic belonging against “Own Your Own Home” and “Better Homes in America”-style ideologies of self-improvement and civic belonging through the building, owning, decoration, and management of proper domestic spaces.

Above all, the suggestion that one’s physical location could determine one’s belonging rather than the other way around upsets a more conventional reliance on a scheme of origins in which one’s familial heritage or ethnic identity would determine where and how one might dwell. By troubling such a scheme, and by doing so through the figures of two characters whose own familial and ethnic origins are a matter of great concern in the text, Barnes not only questions the limits of accommodation within the individual household or family but also within the larger “home” of the nation. Ultimately, Barnes’ exploration of locational legitimacy poses a challenge to the notion that habitation rights should be determined by “native” heritage. She suggests, rather, that once an “outsider” occupies or otherwise engages with a home space, the social order in that space is already transformed. *How* it will be transformed, and whether or not for the better in Barnes’ view, remain separate questions.

It is Kate and Amelia, the contested figures themselves, who reveal this philosophy of domestic legitimacy by arguing about who can and should remain in the Ryder house. The incident occurs when, in protest against the domestic order Ryder has established, they each set out to leave home forever. When they meet on the road, the tension erupts into fistcuffs Barnes

represents as the clash between two explicitly ethnic and in fact eugenically-defined bodies, thus establishing the stakes of the discussion that will follow. Throughout the novel, Amelia and Kate are typed as more and less “desirable” immigrants, respectively, and their ethnic identities align with their positions as Ryder’s more and less “legitimate” partners. Their bloodlines stand out in contrast to the family they enter, as Ryder’s mother Sophia comes from “a great and a humorous stock. By ‘great’ is meant hardy, hardy in life and hardy in death—the early Puritan” (9). When Kate and Amelia fight, the narrative clearly defines them in terms of birth and breeding, evoking eugenic concepts of fitness: the mongrel Kate is figured as an untidy, hot-tempered specimen of “Southern extraction and nothing stronger to call on than generations of Venice and a little County Cork,” while the purer, more unified Amelia is the “lean figure” with “Saxony to draw on” (147-8). As their argument culminates the increasing tensions of co-habitation, we see not just two women who have been fighting for greater influence first in the little log cabin and later in the farmhouse, but two ethnic immigrant figures of more and less eugenically prestigious extraction, fighting for habitation rights.

The text’s attitude toward their conflict invokes but does not simply reify or dispute the nativist scheme so prevalent in American thought at the time of *Ryder’s* publication. Less than a decade earlier, eugenicist and nativist texts such as Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920) had articulated the national sense of incoming ethnic populations—not to mention the African American population already present—as threatening the health of the white race and of the nation as a whole. Neither Amelia nor Kate falls far down on the scale of racial purity defined by Stoddard and others. Still, Amelia represents safe and certain “Saxony,” while Kate’s “uncertain and sundry strains” mark her as the darker, more polluted type. Overall, the relative “desirability” of their breeding aside, they are both, essentially, portrayed as foreigners and,

perhaps not incidentally, bad housekeepers.¹⁷ Layered onto Ryder's social experimentation with polygamy, then, is the experiment of making a home with ethnic immigrant figures defined as outsiders and unfit as national subjects. This is fitting, since the national government's stance towards plural marriage in his time had constructed polygamy in a similar way, coding it *as* foreignness, and primitive, barbarian foreignness at that.

We needn't look further than the two women's implied immigrant status, however, to see the stakes of their household inclusion. In the time between *Ryder's* events and its publication, the ongoing influx of immigrants led to heightened monitoring and restriction in American immigration policy. Marriage policy worked alongside these changes, for "[m]arriage bore on the shape of the body politic just as immigration policy did. Together the two [kinds of policy] had dynamic potential to create new kinds of citizens for the United States, because children born on American soil would be U.S. citizens regardless of their immigrant parents' own capacity for naturalization" (Cott 132). The legal shaping of immigration and marriage in this time privileged men, enhancing male civic status through marriage while the female partner lost it. Furthermore, between 1855 and 1907—also likely the span within which Amelia joined her new husband on U.S. soil—a man's naturalization (or citizenship) made his immigrant wife a citizen, while an American-born woman might lose her citizenship by marrying a non-citizen.¹⁸

These conditions make marital "legitimacy" a matter of supreme importance for the two wife-figures in Ryder's household. Legitimate marriage would make Amelia a legally legitimate (if, due to her gender, individually disenfranchised) American. Kate's more tenuous marital status, on the other hand, renders everything about her experience more tenuous. Immigration policy in her time was geared, among other things, towards routing immorality in the form of prostitution. The text's emphasis on the uncertainty of her origins, combined with the suggestion

of a childhood abroad,¹⁹ raises the possibility that as the illegal interloper, the unmarried mistress, she might be subject to deportation if authorities labeled her an immigrant of loose sexual morals. While Ryder's polygamy makes him the specter of foreign immorality hiding within the protective shield of white, native-born, male citizenship, Kate's position as a sexually active, unmarried woman—and a eugenic mongrel, no less—makes her the transgressing alien, the outsider to be located and ejected from domestic shores. Even were she herself expunged, the threat of impurity remains, as both women's children, born on U.S. soil, would be entitled to a more stable citizenship, and thus both eugenic lines are left to shape the racial future of America. Thus, as Ryder's domestic experiment can be seen as a failed attempt to incorporate non-white figures into the native, Saxon, Puritan household, it stages the politics of national belonging amidst nativist immigration reform, and it offers one vision of how they might play out.

These dynamics, then, inform the conclusion the two women reach after their eugenic boxing match has played out. At this point, they shift into a philosophical argument about legitimacy and domestic inclusion. Amelia declares that “the sole difference between the bastard, per se, and the child of wedlock is, that the wife may leave but the mistress cannot, yet but listen to the nice point of the argument, it is the wife who may enter a house and the mistress who should stay out” (148). Having prefaced the argument by claiming the situation “nicely illustrates the difference between the legitimate and the illegitimate,” Amelia makes her judgment definitive of legitimacy itself. She shifts from moral judgment to semantic reasoning. She not only states that Kate does not belong in the household, but that Kate “cannot” leave the house because she could never legitimately enter it in the first place, thus re-framing more common notions of hereditary and marital “legitimacy” through the figure of the house and one's material relation to it. To counter the proposed distinction, Kate replies, “Had it not been for me, and my

slightly vice versa mode of conduct, where would your philosophy have bedded? Not in your head, I warrant, but in the head of some other wife that I might have helped to it. For were it not for such as me, there would be no such as you” (148). In amazement, Amelia agrees. Kate has not contradicted Amelia’s reasoning so much furthered it. Her lack of legitimate domestic access may deem her illegitimate, but she suggests that the house wouldn’t exist at all if she were not there to be denied the right to enter it. Notably, the narrative layout reinforces this idea, since the cabin’s interior—their first shared home—comes into existence in the text only when Kate enters and disrupts it.

Essentially, by concluding that there would be no “legitimate” without an “illegitimate” to create it, Kate and Amelia anticipate Stallybrass and White’s discussion of the constitution of bourgeois subject, i.e. that it “continuously define[s] and re-define[s] itself through the exclusion of what it mark[s] out as ‘low’—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion [is] constitutive of its identity” (191). Such dynamics inform not only class-formation, but the construction of other categories of belonging from the individual home to the larger “homeland” of the nation. As Rosemary Marangoly George suggests, “the notion of ‘home’ is built on a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive” (2). Thus the excluded subjects are as essential as the included subjects to the category or location they define. The women’s conclusion similarly addresses social processes of defining and reinforcing inclusion and exclusion, as applied to the status of economic, ethnic, and national populations in a home space. Barnes thereby suggests that the less eugenically “fit” and “desireable” of the immigrant populations the two women represent might also be more essential to the larger domestic framework than many Americans considered them. Kate’s philosophy challenges the restrictive Immigration and Quota Acts of the

early 1920s, for instance, by posing new and potentially “unfit” domestic subjects as in fact essential to the stability of the American state.

Kate’s sense of the importance of “illegitimate” members to the home space could also be seen in relation to Bonnie Honig’s treatment of the role of “foreignness” in democracy. Honig suggests that immigrants are vital to maintaining “the popular exceptionalist belief that America is a distinctively consent-based regime, based on choice, not on inheritance, on civic not ethnic ties” (*Democracy and the Foreigner* 75). In this regard, the possibility of Kate transitioning from illegitimate, excluded subject to legitimate, included subject and household member—indeed, her eagerness to secure her place in this space of potential belonging—at once dramatizes the figure of the politically “consenting immigrant” and complicates any underlying reference to the polygamous household as an imagined space of political, personal, and sexual coercion.

Keeping such concerns in mind, it is that much more remarkable that, upon Kate and Amelia’s return to the farmhouse, the narrator describes the episode as “their only (though many times threatened) treason” (151). For the chapter describing the argument ends in their weary but prompt return to the home they were supposedly done with. Though Barnes’ tongue may be firmly in her cheek at this moment as much as any other, it seems unwise to overlook her use of a term signifying such a serious transgression. At its most basic, their offense seems to be that of daring to question the terms of their home space—whether that “home” is construed as a patriarchal household or a vague figure for the nation. Considering the already treasonous implications of the polygamous household’s arrangements, however, we are left to wonder exactly what their civic betrayal has been, and why it should be construed as such.

* * *

To Make of Society an Unknown Quantity

To begin with, a vital hint may lie in an earlier and more fully qualified mention of treason, in which Barnes explores societal criticism of unregulated female sexuality. The chapter “Rape and Repining!” seems at first to lament a young woman’s violation but goes on to show how the “ravished” girl comes to be seen not primarily as a victim but rather as a threat and traitor to society. The narrative voice berates her: “You have ... Made of Society an Unknown Quantity, and this we are not built to bear... and none shall commerce with you, without first turning you over to see where the Die stamps Treason!” (26-7).²⁰ Barnes links treason first to the threat posed by female sexuality and then to its role in defining or obscuring bloodlines. In a nativist culture, not knowing parental origins means not knowing whether an individual should be considered a valid American or not. The implied contingency—the very possibility of such uncertainty—unsettles any sense that “native” types are inherently, unmistakably entitled to occupancy, not to mention that the “other” will be legible as such. On such terms, Barnes lampoons the forces of societal judgment—here represented by the overbearing “Council” (26)—for considering it nothing less than treasonous to make one’s genetic legacy illegible. She who produces the illegitimate child at least as importantly produces illegibility itself; sexual unruliness poses, ultimately, an epistemological threat to nativist ideology.²¹

Barnes goes on to project these concerns about legible heredity as civic legitimacy into the future. Uncertain parentage indicates future generations defined in turn by pollution and a threatening variegation. The child of such a union, as Barnes describes him, “is whirled about in an Uncertainty, and his People shall inherit him for a Birthright” (28). This uncertain offspring soon becomes the unknowable ancestor future generations will inherit. His people, clearly, are afraid of the doubtful strains his “uncertainty” might represent. In Faulkner’s *Absalom*,

Absalom!, the white Canadian Shreve McCannon expresses something similar when he suggests that African Americans “are going to conquer the western hemisphere...and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings” (Faulkner 302). Barnes makes no explicit reference here to ethnic or racial mixture; however, she does portray a societal need to contain the threat of inscrutable female sexuality by othering the woman and her “Uncertain” offspring. The narrative voice demands that the woman in question

get from out our Country and over the Border and into some Neighboring Land,
there to lie, until some Blithering, Scabby Potsherd mends a Stewpan with you, or
... melts you down, to make a Cap for his Heel. So shaken loose, so cut-pursed
that the Uncertainty is out of you, so you set back as Current Coin. (28)

To become a known being again, the woman must be not just socially but geographically abjected. Faced with Uncertainty, the community exiles the illegitimate, refuses her access to the homeland. The penalty for her treasonous act of introducing genealogical uncertainty is the denial, it seems, of citizenship. She and her offspring must be sent out of the country so that her intangible unknowable-ness can be reified into foreignness and then addressed as such.

It is useful here to consider Jani Scandura’s notion of the “borderland geography of the abject,” which builds the element of nationality into Kristeva’s “spatiality of the abject.” Both describe the process by which the “deject,” who seeks to abject another, constantly attempts to order space, or as Scandura puts it, to “seek a fixed place, and thereby encrypt that which he seeks to reject,” but since the “abject, the unnamable Other” is not and cannot be fixed in this way, “[r]efusing to accept the slipperiness of the abject forces one to continually ‘start afresh’ so that one can never define oneself as a subject, never stick to one place” (108). The abjected woman in “Rape and Repining!” is sent across the border in the hopes that such Othering will

make her a fixed, knowable, controllable object. This process is further reinforced in that, having failed to properly enact her assigned sexual and domestic identity, her transgression is figured through her relationship to tangible, malleable domestic materials: having rent the “fabric” of the community’s council with her actions, her material self must be re-fashioned into a distinct and useful object—a stewpan or a shoe—through domestic mending processes.²² But as Scandura indicates, the abject cannot actually be fixed in place, and those who would abject her must continue to struggle with the threat she poses. As Amelia might describe it, they must keep her out of the house, “over the Border” of the domestic, so that her un-belonging is legible.

It is exactly this sort of forced alignment of intangible and embodied otherness that Bonnie Honig refers to in stating that:

the dream of home is dangerous, particularly in postcolonial settings, because it animates and exacerbates the inability of constituted subjects—or nations—to accept their own internal differences and divisions, and it engenders zealotry, the will to bring the dream of unitariness or home into being. It leads the subject to project its internal differences onto external Others and then to rage against them for standing in the way of its dream—both at home and elsewhere. (“Difference, Dilemmas” 270)

Honig characterizes “home” here as a space or group “untroubled by difference” (270), explaining that the difficulty of confronting internal divisions, not only within nations or identity groups, but within individual selves, troubles people deeply. Their work to create the illusion of a home “unriven by difference, conflicts, or dilemmas” (270) requires the projection of internal differences—in this case social elements who would introduce “uncertainty” into the dream of home that is the illusion of “known” society—onto people and/or places that can be perceived as

fully Other. In the “Rape and Repining!” episode, Barnes illustrates dominant powers’ desire to spatialize prejudice by not only attributing the unknowable subject’s undesirability to foreignness but by literally forcing the subject perceived as different and dangerously inscrutable to move to a space outside the national home. Honig and Scandura’s views of this process illustrate not only the cultural need to map social discomfort onto geographical space, but the degree to which the individual home—and the very concept of domestic space—can operate both as a metaphor for and a constitutive step in larger processes of legitimizing and delegitimizing the subject who threatens the imagined unity and safety of the homeland.

The most direct purpose of such maneuverings in “Rape and Repining!” is to name and reify the “Treason[ous]” problem female sexuality poses to the home or homeland that requires a “pure” and legible bloodline, the threat that “pilfer[s] from the Community” by “ma[king] of Society an Unknown Quantity,” or rather, the unregulated introduction of genetic and genealogical uncertainty. When Kate and Amelia commit their own act of “treason,” then, it may relate to their willingness—whether through reproduction or the genealogical “Uncertainty” they already bring with them—to make of Society an Unknown Quantity. They invite a possible future of mixed or supplanted American bloodlines: the mixture of Amelia’s, and more importantly Kate’s, mongrel heritage into the early American Puritan stock of the Ryder family, and thus into the social and ethnic profile of the American home. By agreeing on terms of mutual occupancy, by re-constituting the Puritan household as one that can accommodate those it deems illegitimate and indeed unfit, they invite into the house an ever-shifting balance of ethnic identities that promises to oppose the certainty offered by a nativist notion of racial purity.

It is not only through ethnic character features that Barnes suggests such a possibility. Rather, it is also through the way in which these characters relate to their living spaces that

Barnes invokes broader populations and interpretive frameworks. The Ryders' spatial arrangements in fact not only frame the struggles of ethnicized individuals but invoke the historically particular spatial negotiations of larger ethnic and racial populations, from immigrant tenement crowding to the American history of incorporating slaves into the household. Ultimately, Barnes indicates a kind of racialization of the domestic space itself, suggesting the subversive—indeed, potentially treasonous in the minds of some—possibility that such a racialization of the larger domestic space of the nation might be both inevitable and necessary.

While it is hard to determine whether the Ryders' domestic project tends mainly toward positive or negative potential, it is evidently unsustainable.²³ As both internal and external pressures mount, first in the cabin and then in the farmhouse, it becomes clear that the home contains too many people in too small a space contending for too little in the way of resources. In this regard, it stages the nation's decreasing tolerance for familial arrangements that threatened the reign of the Christian, monogamous model and its reinforcement of founding political ideals. The condition of excess in the Ryder home, however, is not just a matter of numbers. It is Kate's presence that triggers the shift from full to over-crowded, and Barnes couches Kate's arrival in the Ryder cabin between the two chapters that meditate her uncertain constitution. Kate's family history is not so much a description as an assortment of inquiries (81), and it is this embodied question who makes the Ryder household's interior dimensions, furniture, and decorations clearly legible to the reader at the same time she adds to it her own inscrutability. Kate's arrival makes the limitations of the Ryder family's space clear, and makes its further crowding inevitable. And indeed, shortly after Barnes brings Kate into the cabin, the Ryder home becomes home to two expanding family lines. Though Barnes glosses over the transition from one space to another, we eventually find the family in the farmhouse thriving and still further expanding, as

both Kate and Amelia go into labor at once, thus imparting their legacy of foreignness. Though both spaces signal concerns about over-crowding, the following discussion will focus on their first living space, the cottage where their polygamous family project begins, and the space which Barnes draws most attention to by portraying in the greatest detail. Though a cabin in the woods well outside the bounds of New York City, the space begins, with Kate's arrival, to take on features of the crowded tenements that inspired so much public concern both in the time in which the novel is set and the time a few decades later at which it was written. Thus not just socially, but spatially, the immigrants Kate and Amelia invoke the immigrant populations struggling nearby to make the crowded and oppressive conditions of tenement life—indeed of American life—sustainable.

How Ryder's Other-ed Half Lives

In his study of subverted urban slumming narratives, Scott Herring argues that Djuna Barnes and other early 20th-century American authors play on the model of Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* in order to pique and then frustrate readers' desires for revelations of queer metropolitan life. Regarding Barnes in particular, he discusses the explicitly crafted (and subverted) slumming narratives of her early journalistic work, in which she promises to reveal the gritty details of New York metropolitan sub-cultures and ethnic communities and then in fact stops short of fulfilling or actively undermines the readers' desire for salacious exposé.²⁴ Referring to a piece on Chinatown, Herring notes that Barnes "exploits the sensational ethnic body to sustain reader curiosity and narrative tension" (162) only to later "refus[e] to represent properly what the audience expects" (165). Putting aside the question of ethnic exposé for a moment, a similar dynamic is at play in *Ryder*, a text Herring does not address, along with *The*

Antiphon, both of which Daniela Caselli describes along similar lines as “repetitions of a narrative that temptingly offers itself up as biographical and yet fails to work as a key to ‘disclose’ the text” (194).²⁵ And indeed, in *Ryder*, Barnes seems to offer the reader a tour through her own familial underworld, only to leave her “armchair tourists” as confused as they began, if not more so.

Herring’s discussion of ethnic “slumming” on the model of Riis resonates with *Ryder* in a more literal way as well, however. As we have seen, the text does indeed exploit the sensational ethnic body, but it thwarts readers’ expectations not so much by denying them the gritty details as by getting *into* the gritty issue of ethnicity and socio-spatial belonging in the national family. It does, this, furthermore, by invoking the literal content rather than the form of Riis’ narrative—the spatial and social constitution of the slums themselves. The Ryder cabin may be located in an as-yet-un-industrialized hamlet, but the pastoral setting belies the widespread urban- and sub-urbanization 1920s readers witnessed, not without concern,²⁶ and the degree to which the problems of the teeming household in quiet Storm-king-on-Hudson are the problems of Progressive Era New York City itself, and of Jacob Riis’s New York in particular. Through the characterization of Ryder’s two wives as immigrant types, and through the tension resulting from their families overflowing the household, Barnes not only plays with the sort of slumming narratives Scott Herring identifies but, in a sense, maps the Ryder family’s domestic troubles onto the fraught urban space of the slums, thus emphasizing the role of material space in mediating identity-based belonging.

As Doreen Massey contends, “the spatial organization of society...is integral to the production of the social, and not merely the result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics” (4). This is true because spatial arrangements put phenomena into “relationship to one

other in such a way that new social effects are provoked” (4). Shaping social relations on all scales from the room to the household to the nation to the globe, “the spatial” is essential to “politics in the broadest sense of the word” (Massey 4). Space, then, is not only organized by social needs but takes part in producing social relations. Keeping this in mind, we can better see how Barnes’ arrangement of relations in the Ryder household may be linked to larger cultural frameworks, staging the role of domestic space in shaping the relationship between individuals and the nation they call, or wish to call, home.

In particular, the eugenically and ethnically-framed familial crowding in the Ryder cabin resonates with Progressive Era tenement reform ideology, which depended on the notion that domestic spatial arrangements produced social identities, practices, and relations. Reformers such as Lawrence Veiller, Jacob Riis, and others emphatically aligned poor housing with bad citizenship. In particular, “Proper spaces for familial privacy (alongside the norm of homeownership...) were central, for Progressives, in the ‘Americanization’ of the immigrant poor” and to a broader “nation-building project of spatial rationalization” (Feldman 130). In particular, Progressives wished to maintain “separation—walls between families, walls between individual family members, walls between functions, and walls between types of persons” in order to produce “responsible, normalized individuals...and families” (Feldman 130), who would then also be good citizens.²⁷ This concern applied within and between individual family homes, addressing both the issue of an entire family living in one tenement room, for instance, and the mixture of different domestic units present in either a hotel or a private home taking in lodgers. In any of these cases, reformers felt that the lack of privacy—of social and material separation—interfered with the maintenance of gender roles, the modesty of individual family members, the separation of private and commercial spheres, and the separation of class, racial,

and ethnic groups, to name a few concerns. Proximity and over-crowding were also associated with the spread of disease, linking fears about physical and moral health and pathologizing the material arrangement of living spaces. Resisting “multiple forms of contamination, mixture, and violations of spatial integrity,”²⁸ Progressive reformers both fought for sufficient privacy within dwellings and hoped “to eliminate diverse housing options” (such as lodging-houses) in favor of detached, single-family, preferably owner-occupied homes, “in order to protect the modern nuclear family and its home from the contaminations of a disorderly, impure culture of urban diversity, individuality, and subcultural sociability” (Feldman 131). Ultimately, reformers believed that the proper arrangement of architectural space and distribution of people within could produce moral, physiological, and civic purity. Over-crowding, on the other hand, would encourage decay in individuals and, by extension, in the nation they constituted.

Though similarly addressing the conception of the material home as an expression of Christian morality and refuge from social contamination, Karen Halttunen describes how a different set of living spaces developed between the Victorian era and the early 20th century, the same span encapsulating the contrast between the time of the Ryder family’s trials and their story’s publication in the late 1920s. Halttunen argues that domestic spaces across this time registered and facilitated a larger cultural shift from an emphasis on moral character to an emphasis on expressing personality.²⁹ Earlier Gothic homes, for instance, directly signaled Christian morality by architecturally echoing the contours of churches. As housing styles developed, urban Victorian homes reflected not so much church architecture as a middle-class social status assumed, within an American Protestant ethic, to indicate adherence to Christian morality—notably the same Christian morality associated with the monogamous, single-race, child-producing marital model identified by Nancy Cott. Victorian homes were marked,

Halttunen explains, by the use of front parlors as receiving rooms which buffered between the more private living spaces of the home and the public space of the street and its unsavory characters. Victorian interiors also maintained class (and ethnic or racial) separation by including back staircases and otherwise clearly distinguishing between family and servant spaces.

This widespread concern for the material arrangement and decoration of households—from the level of sub/urban planning to the placement of water closets to the selection of items on a sideboard—brings into relief the iniquitous connotations of the Ryder family home. Reformers' approach suggested an idea of citizenship based on spatialized identity, on an ethnicity that could be exaggerated or effaced by the combination of domestic architectural features and occupancy conditions. Such logic further illuminates how the Ryders' architectural arrangements might structure perceptions of their particular form of bad citizenship. For indeed, though far enough from the urban world Riis and others described, the Ryder home is both small and crowded, and it lacks features reformers would have considered essential to familial and civic health. The first Ryder home is introduced as “a small log cabin of two rooms, one above the other” (84). Though Barnes notably does not offer an illustration of the cabin amidst the others she produced for the text, she creates a narrative blueprint of sorts, laying out the cabin's dimensions: it was “fifteen feet high and twenty-nine feet wide,” hewn of pine, and with steps “three to its stoop.” The cabin seems to shrink even further once, with Kate, we first see the interior, consisting of two rooms, one above the other, which actually amount to “but a single room with a loft and a ladder that let down for climbing” (86). At this point, the house is already full, and as the family expands, Barnes gives no clear indication of adjustments being made either to expand the house's bounds or to partition interior rooms for greater privacy or specificity of function. Feldman discusses the importance of interior partition walls in organizing

families as virtuous, responsible citizens. It seems that the only walls in the Ryder cabin, however, are the exterior ones. There are two rooms, barely, but they are one above the other, and with no architectural partitions subdividing the upstairs or downstairs rooms. According to reform ideology, the lack of walls suggests an unhealthy collapse of activities and identities. The conflation of rooms underlies the uneasy conflation of families in ways that illustrate Progressives' fears, even as the Ryders move from the smaller cabin to the presumably larger farmhouse.

Regarding the latter space, Barnes makes occasional reference to individual rooms, but such references are limited and vague, with the music room getting more frequent mention. While such a labeled room indicates both a greater quantity of space and a specificity of function the Progressives would appreciate, the familial expansion combined with the narrative refusal to differentiate other spaces in the new house—particularly in comparison to Barnes' specificity about the cabin—ultimately continues rather than dispels the sense of crowding and conflation the Progressives found so troubling. This sense comes through, for instance, in a moment when a young Ryder brother and sister witnessing childbirth in the farmhouse soon invoke incest by playing at labor as their own version of mother and father. More explicitly still, even as the number of rooms seems to increase, Kate and her progeny's eugenically inferior strains continue to infuse the purer space of the legal family's Puritan and Saxon line, threatening ultimately to crowd the Saxon out. This sense is even further reinforced by the way the text seems to jump from the carefully identified dimensions and inhabitants of the cabin to the vague and teeming farmhouse, as though the arrival of the eugenically inferior subject in the limited space of the home automatically and immediately triggers such a result. Overall, the locals might be shocked by the scandal of Ryder's matter-of-factly polygamous household, but Lawrence Veiller or Jacob

Riis would have told them to expect as much.

And the locals are indeed shocked. Kate's full-time domestic membership literally makes Ryder's practices legible to the community, since "there was a deal of trouble in keeping Ryder's [polygamous] life out of the papers" (213). Fearing moral decay—and, as Foucault might note, intent on getting the family to normalize its children by properly interpolating them into the disciplinary, regulating space of the schoolroom³⁰—the community sends a delegation to investigate the "conditions" at "Bull's-Ease" and get the children back to school. The group, "headed by a social worker...carrying a copy of the Christian Hymnal" (213), comes primarily to determine the familial and spatial arrangements, as shown when the first speaker explains they've heard "'that there are two families in this house (he pointed)'" attached to only one man (213). In light of the concern about moral and civic inadequacies linked to over-crowding and family living arrangements, as well as the potential outright illegality of marital arrangements, the supposedly well-meaning social worker and crew call to mind the practice of visiting poor and immigrant families to encourage them to conform to middle-class values and standards of living. The 1886 philanthropy journal "Lend a Hand," for instance, reports the belief that "household visiting among the poor was the first step towards elevating their condition" (Hale 101). This visit to the Ryders shows the increasing threat of not only community censure but the kind of state intervention associated with populations whose civic and social legitimacy were in question.³¹ It also illuminates the continuum between attitudes toward identity and space in the Progressive Era and the time of Barnes' writing.

Such efforts to elevate and Americanize continued into the decade of *Ryder's* publication as well in ways that further emphasize the role of standardizing domesticity in producing ideal citizens. For the Ryders' domestic disarray, such as it is, must be understood in relation to two

related but separate domestic models: that of the family's Progressive Era context as well as that of the 1920s housing discourse in which *Ryder's* author and reader were steeped. The latter era's discourse of ideal domesticity perhaps put less emphasis on ameliorating living conditions for the immigrant poor and more emphasis on standardizing home spaces so as to facilitate non-normative domestic subjects' ability to regulate themselves, thus simultaneously signaling the influence of mass-production ideology and strengthening the foundation for the contemporary neo-liberal approach to ideal homeowner-citizenship.³²

In the 1920s, for example, the Better Homes Campaign organized demonstration home competitions geared at correcting the domestic habits of immigrants, African Americans, and the nation's poor, all of whom had to be brought into alignment with white, native-born, middle-class American practices and values for the sake of a healthy, stable nation. The campaign opened these model homes to the public, ultimately choosing a national winner (Hutchison, "The Cure" 173) and thus tying instances of domestic improvement to a national standard. The Better Homes movement and *The Delineator*, an associated publication, believed that "the problems of the United States could be solved through specific instruction in the construction, organization, and supervision of proper homes" (Hutchison, "The Cure" 178). In 1925, for instance, *The Delineator* published a story recounting an Italian immigrant mother's tour through a demonstration home, culminating in her crying out to her children, "with tears in her eyes... 'Here is the place where they learn you how to live! This is what America means!'" (Hutchison, "The Cure" 178). Domestic space operated as an example and a tool, the model and the means of ensuring conformity to it.

While the earlier discourse of tenement reform had performed a serious critique of inadequate living spaces, ideal housing discourse in the early 20th century, as discussed in the

introduction, paired the identification of a specific social and material model with advances in industrial technology that provided the means to re-produce it on a large scale. Government involvement in promoting such models, furthermore, explicitly linked the material model to model citizenship. There was a proliferation of demonstration houses, model home competitions, mail-order house catalogues, magazine floor plans, and courses in proper domestic management. These images and examples of model domesticity aimed, specifically, to reform the domestic landscape and the domestic subjects inhabiting it. As Hutchison argues,

the Better Homes campaign attempted to design ethnicity out of the appropriate landscape. Assuming that immigrants interacted outside on the sidewalks, the movement sought to bring them indoors to the proper controlled domestic sphere. Within the dwelling, immigrants needed dictates on cleanliness of kitchens, minds, and bodies, for they, assumed *The Delineator* fearfully, lived in filthy ignorance. Visual instruction could convert viewers, thereby insuring stability within the home, the community, and the nation. (178)

Such efforts used domestic space as a means of bringing varied Americans into line with a certain—primarily white, middle-class—standard. Better Homes was far from alone, furthermore, in the effort to move disorderly domestic subjects into domestic spaces and to let them know just what constituted proper domestic space and proper subjectivity within it.

As discussed in the introduction, the early 20th century saw an array of organizations, ideologies, and technologies that either aimed to standardize and improve domestic life or provided the material means of doing so. Perhaps most relevant to the non-standard domesticity of the Ryders and their owner-occupied, over-occupied household is the Own Your Own Home Campaign. Moving under the aegis of the Department of Labor in 1919, this movement brought

the authority of the federal government to bear on promoting a very particular material domestic ideal—that of the single-family suburban bungalow—and a very particular social configuration—that of the monogamous, single-race, child-producing family—to inhabit it. This is, notably, the very social configuration Nancy Cott identifies as the marital model long linked—to the exclusion, indeed the persecution, of others—to founding American political ideals. This OYOH-style bungalow is also exactly the sort of space Halttunen identifies as replacing the more formal Victorian houses with their front parlors and back staircases. As the middle class, home-ownership rates, and suburbia each expanded, the Victorian floor plan’s “standardized air of propriety” (Halttunen 161) would give way to the standardized spatial ideal of the 1920s OYOH campaigns and even the standardized building materials of mass-produced 1920s pre-fabricated homes.³³ Whether ordered from a catalogue or otherwise, these modern spaces were, as Halttunen points out, more informal homes with open floor plans. They allowed easy communication between rooms and focused not on parlors but “living rooms” that invited rather than quarantined social exchange, decorating not with an excess of goods meant to indicate the moral character associated with social stature (à la Veblen’s notion of conspicuous consumption) but with carefully selected items, arranged to express the personal interests and traits of family members. In these detached, single-family, suburban spaces, servants were less likely to be employed and one needn’t worry about riff-raff off distant urban streets, but the social buffering of back stairways and parlors was now provided on a different spatial scale by the economic and social segregation of neighborhoods.

Building on Halttunen’s discussion of this shift from domestic spatial signification of character to personality, I would suggest that the 1920s ideal housing discourse adds a further element. While there are ways in which housing has always functioned as a register—or even

proclamation—of civic belonging and/or devotion, the OYOH discourse linked various aspects of ideal selfhood, including citizenship, to the act of purchasing the proper sort of home in a new way, as the mass-production of housing materials in this time made home-ownership more affordable and thus feasible as not only an ideal but a standard to which the average citizen could be expected to conform. As one ad stated outright, for instance, “The Man Who Owns His Home is a better Worker, Husband, Father, Citizen, and a real American” (Luken and Vaughan 1615). Thus such campaigns established a new ideal domesticity, in which the space of the modern home corralled a total package of proper subjectivities and practices including ideals of gender performance, intra-racial heterosexual reproduction, and civic legitimacy. And further, in which all these things could be achieved—or performed, or aspired towards—by means of consumption. This new ideal domesticity, furthermore, could be promoted on a new scale in Barnes’ time, as the technology of mass-production also made images and descriptions of the ideal more widely available and visually appealing, thus allowing ubiquitous print media to take some of the pressure off reformers and their earnest house calls.

From the perfectly arranged kitchens of demonstration homes to the OYOH pamphlet drawings of happy, white, middle-class, heterosexual couples on the verge of home ownership, proponents of ideal domesticity employed what I would like to call *instructional space*. They did so by turning ideal domestic spaces into instructional tools in two ways: first through the process of “visual instruction” Hutchison identifies and second through the notion that by purchasing, building, or living in approved domestic spaces, inhabitants would be conditioned, by the space itself, to learn the habits and values that made them proper domestic subjects in both senses of the word. That is, as their proper household habits would make them proper Americans in a broader sense; their domestic practices—from good housekeeping to owning the right sort of

home—would re-cast them as domestic rather than foreign subjects. Or so the mythology goes.

Thus, when Barnes published the narrative floor plan, as it were, of the Ryders' domestic non-conformity in all its irreverent glory, she presented it to a readership well-acquainted with the potential of domestic space, and its representation, to register and even determine the individual's place in the social order. A readership well-acquainted as well with the mythology of ideal housing as the path to ideal selfhood. There is nothing tidy, however, about the Ryder household or its relationship to domestic ideals in either its own moment or the later decades that would read of it. The narrative's vague temporality places it somewhere between Progressive tenement reform and OYOH discourse, but that vagueness only emphasizes Ryder's resonance with a more modern model of homeownership. Far from the teeming city, the Ryder cabin in a bucolic upstate New York on the verge of suburbanization aligns well enough, at first glance, with both the late-19th-century developing suburban "ideal of a detached dwelling in a semirural setting" (Halttunen 168) and the 1920s OYOH owner-occupied single-family bungalow, as does the farmhouse. The apparent move from the smaller cabin to the larger farmhouse (along with its as yet unpaid mortgage) even models the idealized homeownership trajectory of the OYOH discourse. The social and spatial deviance these spaces contain, however, makes the Ryders outliers in the 1920s as well as the late 1800s. For the Ryder home contains a family that is at once single and double, exuberantly heterosexual but with a mix of marital preferences, run by a man who is both citizen and outlaw, and who seems inclined to routinely move his family rather than pay when the mortgage comes due, thus vexing the straightforward association of homeownership with social stability and civic responsibility. Furthermore, Ryder shares the running of his household with not only two partners but also his mother, thus further flouting an OYOH mentality's rejection of multi-generation households with their connotations of

immigrant and/or lower-class familial sociality.

Indeed, it is clear enough that the Ryders flout both Progressive Era and OYOH/“Better Homes”-style models, making a heathen tenement hovel of their little bungalow as they do, but Ryder’s stake in the houses complicates things, since one of his personas, at least, is that of the self-made free-thinking man who has built his home (or at least some of its furnishings) with his own hands, more on which anon. To the degree that he’s figured as an independent head of a theoretically private, detached, quasi-suburban, owner-occupied household, and thus holding up his end of the deal, the family’s experience of surveillance and persecution shows the degree to which that model belies the persistent social exclusion of non-normative subjects, despite its explicit, even propagandic promises of alignment between proper domesticity and citizenship. Invoking the late 19th-century discourse of ethnicized tenement space (along with its threats to the nation’s moral and civic health) through the lens of the early 20th-century (with its capacity to mass-produce the domestic ideal both materially and ideologically), the text shows a conceptual tightening of the vise, the ongoing effort to expunge those who don’t conform.

Keeping these things in mind, we must be that much more attentive to the family’s own notions of what the home can be and include, as their space, too, functions as instructional space in its own ways. For a society accustomed to taking cues from “House Beautiful,”³⁴ what tips might the Ryder’s “House Squalorous” have to offer? Above all, I would argue, it calls readers to rethink the ways in which we define our most basic terms of belonging, particularly as they relate to the management of the spaces we most intimately inhabit. In a trajectory of home spaces signifying character to personality to patriotism, the Ryder home puts a new spin on the personality element by extending it, as it were, to personnel. Jean-Cristophe Agnew describes the appeal of decorating “modern” homes with items that are “picked up” here and there rather than

“built up” so as to indicate one’s travels and interests (141). In a sense, Ryder and Sophia construct the social space of their home in a similar way, acquiring one wife for Ryder in the U.K. and a second in the U.S. who further suits his tastes and expresses his marital values.

Putting aside for a moment the truly problematic connotations of objectifying family members, a more optimistic view might thus see the Ryders not only decorating their house but constructing their household and family according to the modern “personality” model in that it expresses chosen investments rather than inherited or imposed moral codes and social forms. Considering the importance of the home in both Ryder’s time and Barnes’ as an expression of (or path towards) citizenship, we might see this mode of domestic composition as expressing a civic stance as well. This particular microcosm of the homeland attempts, if turbulently enough, to include varied ethnic strains and, more generally, a contentious assortment of values and agendas—an assortment we might view through Honig’s notion of the “dilemmatic space” of democracy. Insofar as the home represents the material locus of intimate private life, individual personalities, civic subjectivity, and nation-building, the Ryder home’s struggle to figure out the contours of its own capacity for belonging is instructional indeed.

Consider, for instance, Ryder’s reaction to the concerned citizens’ home visit, which reinforces, however oddly, Kate’s notion that her illegitimacy is not only allowable but integral to the home. When Ryder sees the delegation coming, he says “to Amelia, his wife: ‘Dress yourself in your black silk, my love, and as for Kate, keep her in the cupboard’” (213). The passage unnecessarily restates that Amelia is the “wife” and emphasizes that she can be displayed as such. Meanwhile—and in a way, incidentally, which strikingly recalls Harriet Jacobs’ narration of being hidden briefly in a compartment in the floor and then for many years in an attic crawlspace while fleeing slavery³⁵—this incident highlights Kate’s taboo status so far

as to not only put her out of sight but integrate her into the material of the house itself. Though a bit farcically, this situation might inspire the image of a social worker throwing open the cupboard door and finding Kate inside, and it even echoes Riis' description of being on a raid and opening the doors of impossibly small living spaces only to find them full of inhabitants. More importantly, Barnes portrays Kate in this moment as illegitimate and invisible but also imbricated with and thus somehow essential to the domestic structure itself, perhaps having her moment of being converted to the stewpan in the cupboard, in preparation for her upcoming transformation into Ryder's primary, recognized, legitimate wife.³⁶

Though again in a way that does not confirm Ryder's own progressive intentions, Barnes drives the point further in another incident obscures individual identity within the home's material features. Also revisiting the "uncertainty" Barnes associates with Kate and Amelia women, Ryder calls out to both at a certain moment in order for one to take a parcel from him and the text only states that "one of them came and took it, unwrapping behind the closed door" (157). In this instance, as when their children cause a disturbance, the women are portrayed to some extent as interchangeable agents of opaque actions, perhaps somehow indistinguishable despite all their specified and significant differences. From Ryder's perspective, when trouble arises or a menial task needs performing, it becomes unclear and perhaps irrelevant which is which. Their acts of illumination occur behind closed doors; their opacity is architecturally reinforced. And their potential lack of distinction can be convenient or threatening, as the occasion demands. This kind of ambiguity further aligns the women with the populations they may represent, highlighting the degree to which society has often unevenly recognized the specificity of marginalized figures, dehumanizing them at some times and singling them out at others. It also reveals their ethnic specificity as constructed and contingent, thus undermining

any scheme that would base their respective occupancy rights on ethnic identity.

Furthermore, when we read the Ryder home's Progressive Era valence against its vividness, in the 1920s context of its readers, as an example of domestic variation in the midst of a culture of domestic standardization, we can see it pushing towards a conception of the home that privileges representation over gate-keeping. Standing in bold and even cheeky opposition to domestic models from Victorian parlor propriety to Own-Your-Own-Home suburban bungalow domestic-consumer-citizenship, the Ryder household so intently insists on the necessary presence of those marked for exclusion that it gestures towards a notion of "home" based on constitution rather than competition. That is, the narrative revels in the variation the household contains, making its conflicts the very stuff of real domestic life while the drive toward a monolithic, culturally sterilized, standardized, family life appears, in the form of the censoring neighborhood party, as the threat from outside.

Still, the text undermines this attitude as well. There is a gesture toward refiguring the home as a space of democratic, dilemmatic inclusion—an unstable space, but one that genuinely strives towards justice by beginning with the honest representation of the ever-shifting dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that sustain home spaces. This gesture is complicated, however, by a kind of hypocrisy that creeps up from time to time in the two figures, Ryder and Sophia, who ultimately run the household. Barnes associates them both with founding political ideals and thus with perpetual aspiration toward an ethics of universal inclusion. She also highlights, however, ways in which both are limited by their own private interests. The implications of this conflict—and material domestic space's role in mediating it—become clear when we consider the tension between how Ryder understands his home's capacity for universal inclusion and how he reacts when that capacity is challenged by a kind of racial inclusion he seems unwilling to accept.

The Race That Is Ryder

Before Amelia goes to America with Ryder and his mother, she and her sister discuss what Ann fears to be Amelia's imminent disgrace and destruction. Whether Ann considers pre-marital sex or scalping a greater threat is evidently a toss-up, but she seems to feel that if anything is certain, it's that Amelia had better look out for Ryder's notion that "one woman was never enough for a man." The sisters have the following exchange:

"That," said Amelia, "is a theory which he holds for the race in general, but surely not for persons in particular."

"Where the race in general enters a man's head," retorted her sister hotly, "there, in the end, you'll find many persons in particular..." (45)

Amelia responds that she will anchor her husband to herself by making her own bed unmistakable, stitching into the coverlet, "Here I be!" She seems to believe that by carefully inscribing the material elements of the domestic space, she can regulate her domestic life.

Her interest in mediating sexual boundaries through domestic materiality, however, combines with her sister's comment about particularity to reveal the broader racial anxiety permeating the text, an anxiety that registers not only Ryder's, but Barnes' approach to race, which seems to champion the variability of the human race in general but tends to falter when dealing with individual racial or racialized subjects. In *Ryder*, this contradiction plays out again through questions of domestic inclusion, and Barnes' treatment of it here enriches critical discussions about her tendency to at once challenge and reify the marginalization of certain kinds of figures. Nancy Bombaci argues that although in *Ryder*, for instance, Barnes "calls into question the heterosexual male's visual appropriation and commodification of...deviance and

seeks to figure ways wherein women can own their own difference,” her work in general “tends to essentialize racial and cultural difference” (63).³⁷ Her affirmations of gender difference and agency tend to rely on reductive tropes when it comes to other kinds of difference, as in the 1914 journalistic piece “The Girl and the Gorilla,” in which Barnes glorifies the animal in question through an anthropomorphism that valorizes female defiance but deploys racist stereotypes about African people to do it. Ultimately, Bombaci argues that “Barnes fails to examine thoroughly her own inclination towards engaging in lurid forms of objectification” (63). This tendency has a complex effect of shuffling rather than de-bunking social hierarchies, not suggesting a unified anti-normative stance in regards to marginalized subjectivities but instead creating an ever-shifting tangle of assertions and abnegations of agency and value. Barnes’ work is often troubled by these contradictions, and *Ryder* is no exception.

Indeed, the contradiction Bombaci identifies between *Ryder* and the gorilla piece exists at least as starkly within *Ryder* itself. The treatment of Kate and Amelia is the most obvious locus of this sort of ambiguity in *Ryder*. However, while it is rarely noted, Barnes evokes the racial body here as well, adding an important element to the more general discussion of domestic and civic legitimacies in the text by suggesting that the domestic space in question is even less able to accommodate the black subject than the ethnic immigrant. Evidently, it isn’t just Kate-Careless taking over the house and Polish Lena lurking in the ditches that might forever darken the Ryder line, but a possibility presented at once as more vague and more threatening that future Ryder progeny might include black children among their numbers. This possibility raises the same essential questions about the place of the “illegitimate” in the private and, for that matter, national home. The narrative directly ponders these issues through the episode in which Amelia bears a child her husband initially perceives as black, raising questions about the possible place

of the black body in the Ryder family household, and further directing attention away from genealogy to a focus on membership in or access to the material space of the home.

In addition to a handful of specific instances, the text invokes issues of race in broadly suggestive ways. Strikingly, though perhaps coincidentally, the title itself is a homophone for the blues term “rider,” which signifies a freely circulating sexual partner and thus resonates with Ryder and his practices in more ways than one. And while the connection is fairly general, critics sometimes associate Barnes with Ma Rainey, the first to record the blues hit “See See Rider,”³⁸ through their mutual expressions of queer sexuality. However independently, the artists, through the use of the term “rider” in one case and its suggestive homophone “Ryder” in the other, similarly invoke both black sexuality and the consequences of free sexual circulation. While Ryder himself is not coded as black, his sexual circulation certainly makes him an “easy rider” figure, and Ma Rainey’s speaker expresses a frustration much like Amelia’s fury about Ryder’s open adultery. Furthermore, while Ryder himself is the quintessentially white “early Puritan” figure, he is positioned briefly, when Amelia gives birth, as the father of a black child. His associations with the Transcendentalists and free-thinkers, meanwhile, further his status as an iconic white American, but also link him to their concern about abolition.

This blend of associations frames Ryder’s stated intention to be the “Father of All Things,” filling the world with what he himself identifies as “the Race that shall be Ryder” (210). In various ways, he is set up as a Whitmanian figure whose philosophy of universal fatherhood, like Whitman’s democratic brotherhood, could easily include, for instance, the escaped slave or otherwise beleaguered black subject. He lists his imagined progeny, animal and human, at great length, and he explains that of these many creatures, “Some shall be prophets, some sophists, some scoundrels, some virgins, some bawds, some priests... some pussywinks...some doctors,

some presidents,” and somewhere in the middle of his catalogue, “some freemen” and “some slaves” (210).³⁹ When Ryder expresses his desire to perpetuate a “race” of Ryders, he seems to value variation, but we must wonder if in fact he means only volume. Explicitly, at least, he uses the word in its late-19th-century “protean” sense, “mixing physiognomy, color, nationality, culture, and religion,” at once “biologistic” and “cultural, often used to mean nationality or national derivation” (Cott 134). He expands the notion further still, even, to include animal- as well as human-kind.

As Ann’s comment suggests, however, a “race in general” is constituted by an assortment of “persons in particular” whose individual racial identities might complicate the more monolithic notion with which one has started. When it comes to Ryder welcoming particular people into his own household—as a constituent element of his own material domestic reality—the category of race in the 20th-century sense turns out to be a stumbling block. As it turns out, Ryder’s obsession with being a father of all possible subjects seems to include the caveat that the black subject not be one among his actual progeny. His insistence on verifiable parentage suggests not universal inclusion but a more pragmatic desire to father a proliferation of children unmistakably like himself. He wants to propagate not only his genes but genealogical certainty itself, to people the world with his own kind. This conflict, emerging through the framework of Ryder’s project of polygamy, registers a concern with the concept of race itself, and the degree to which racial control is possible.⁴⁰

His project, like any good plan for world domination, begins at home, where he is steadily saturating the domestic territory with his own confirmed children. With this goal of Certainty throwing the threat of Kate and Amelia’s associations with Uncertainty into relief, we can see the seriousness of Ryder’s alarmed cry, upon the birth of Amelia’s most recent child, that

“the babe is black!” Though the doctor immediately declares that “bile alone is the father of its colour” (97) rather than the suggested adultery and miscegenation, Ryder’s fear and surprise confirms that black offspring are not among the “All Things” of which or whom he intends to be father. His notion is not a transcendent model of race but a familial model of rulership. His fantasy of creating a race is indeed a fantasy of racial control, despite his identification with abolition-minded thinkers who critiqued the American myth of universal inclusion that also left its black members out of the supposed “all.” He not only shies away at the first hint that he might be expected to offer full domestic membership to a black subject, but seems unable to face the uncertainty itself in the form of unstable racial identity. For all his appreciation of variability, it seems his is not what Robert Reid-Pharr describes as “a racial economy that would allow for indeterminacy” (68). At the first hint of “impurity,” he jumps across the binary to declare the baby’s blackness, showing his own inability to let uncertainty stand.

The intersection of concerns about race, parentage, certainty, and genealogy in this moment furthermore, indicates the text’s resonance with not only the British literary tradition and the occasional Transcendentalist but with 19th and 20th-century American narratives about passing, miscegenation, and domestic inclusion that include the trope of the birth or feared birth of a black child to white or passing parents.⁴¹ Regarding such narratives, Werner Sollors notes that the plantation system created the conditions for a “family order” that included slave mistresses and children alongside the recognized white family, “only to disown the new family members,” who are “then reduced to making up a loose shadow family. The irony is further compounded when, because of the non-inclusion in the genealogical tree of certain offspring, kindred on the same or different sides of the color line have relations that would otherwise be prohibited” (344-5). Though Amelia and Kate’s newborns are in this moment far from such a

threat, it is notable that their births are ushered in by Julie and Tim's doubly incestuous play, which poses Julie as the child mother in labor and, in different ways, both her father Wendell and her brother Timothy as sexual partners. Kate and Amelia's reproductive acts raise ideas of problematic sexual unions, as though their reproductive agency automatically threatens unwanted racial mixture as well as the incestuous familial mixture that plots of illicit interracial coupling often warn against.

While Barnes plays with miscegenation and incest plots, the Ryder household also echoes the kind of household arrangement such narratives were closely involved with. Sollors' discussion of the slaveholder's "shadow family" as those who are not included in the "genealogical tree" reminds us of Barnes' illustration of the Ryder family tree, in which the "legitimate" members actually sit in the branches while the "illegitimate" wife and children are scattered around on the ground. Insofar as Ryder is associated with the Puritan stock of founding fathers, he is also associated with the contradictions inherent to their ways of arranging the founding American households, homesteads which were understood to both represent and constitute the nation. Many of those households, of course, included slaves as members and in some cases—Jefferson's being perhaps most famous, though by no means unique—included slaves who were indeed members of the family. The suggestion that one of Ryder's wives might bear a black child, combined with the household's illicit inclusion of a "darker" family not recognized by law, invites readers to see the Ryder home as a representation not only of nativist debates about ethnic-eugenic fitness and domestic belonging, but perhaps also of the degree to which the quintessential American household has always hidden a range of racial and sexual dynamics inconvenient to idealized narratives of American founding.

This suggestion, of course, does not permit the simple elision of the issues of national

inclusion faced by African Americans and ethnic immigrants, nor does it make *Ryder* a narrative that is only and essentially about questions of racial or ethnic identity and the degree of national belonging that should ideally go hand in hand with citizenship, not to mention personhood. As Kaivola argues, it is essential not to overlook or simply conflate Barnes' treatments of outsider figures but rather to examine how they differ and intersect (173).⁴² Still, as the incident of the briefly-black baby suggests, Barnes explores here the ways in which the Ryder house can be understood as containing a kind of "shadow family," and that arrangement has implications that cross racial and ethnic lines. Fundamentally, the household is composed of two families who are related by ties of both blood and affect but separated by a line of legal legitimacy based on constructed ideas of social and civic validity. Ultimately, the novel suggests that any home can be defined by a dependency on both "legitimate" and "illegitimate" subjects, and that one's societal legitimacy can in turn be understood as a function of one's position in that house.

It is not entirely clear whether Barnes' invoking shadow families and plantation households constitutes a critique of racial exploitation or an aesthetic exploitation of racial dynamics in the U.S. and the literary tropes that have expressed and shaped them. And indeed, the confusion about the newborn opens a meditation on race and social justice that shows these issues to be of real concern in the text without entirely clarifying Barnes' attitude. Immediately after the child is born—the moment in which Ryder indicates that his home cannot materially or ideologically accommodate the black subject—Barnes devotes a chapter to Amelia's dream of "the Ox of a Black Beauty" (98), which protests such racism. The dream is

an effort, naïve in its way... as is the way of a woman who would set a mighty wrong to rights, to get the black man the attention of the Lord, and a place in his mercies, she having been troubled with the way Wendell had said of her last, 'It's

black.’ (98)

In this dream, the black ox lies down on Amelia’s bed beside her and says, “I am also.” The ox is beautiful, majestic, and a powerful spokesman for his existential validity. However, while Amelia’s dream may sympathize with and even valorize him, the text also preserves his marginalization by figuring black subjectivity only through a romanticized work animal. As Edmunds points out, the dream also reinforces the idea of miscegenation as a threat and evokes, as much as anything else, the discourse of white supremacy (“Narratives” 230). Amelia’s flirtation here with the idea of interracial union, in all its ambivalence, brings a black figure into a domestic space of sorts, but not quite the space of her own home. In this regard, she shares with Ryder both the ability to sustain a broader theoretical notion of inclusiveness and the inability to support the literal, material incorporation of a black subject into the household. Amelia incorporates blackness into the text’s otherwise main focus on gradations of whiteness. That incorporation is limited, however, and can occur only through dreams and misunderstandings.

While blackness is unincorporable on the one hand, however, Barnes also draws attention to, and even ridicules, the nativist and racist fear that blackness in fact somehow constantly threatens a forced incorporation through mere spatial proximity. When Amelia plans to go to the U.S. to become Ryder’s wife, her sister exclaims in distress that in time, Amelia will “be as black as an Ethiop...!” (43). Furthermore, Ann criticizes Ryder and his mother for “pluck[ing] the very feathers from [Amelia’s] breast to line their nest with,” a practice Ann seems assured will continue “in America too!” (46). By joining the Ryder family, Amelia is, in a sense, bodily integrated into their living space as surely as she is about to be integrated into their national space. This process, Ann implies, will also move Amelia into a different racial group. Ann at once equates racial contagion with spatial proximity and figures American space as inherently

black space. She implies that geographical and material space—particularly when also serving as domestic space—is itself raced and racializing.

These sentiments not only trouble an excitable fictional sister, but exhibit a logic shared by many of Ann's factual American contemporaries. Discussing the color line in late 1800s New York tenements, Jacob Riis describes certain tenement areas as being inextricably associated with the race of their tenants. He criticizes the fact that in these areas, where African American people have lived for some time, landlords can charge exorbitant rates and refuse to make repairs. "The reason for this systematic robbery," he explains,

is that white people will not live in the same house with colored tenants, or even in a house recently occupied by negroes, and that consequently its selling value is injured. The prejudice...is not lessened by the house agents, who have set up the maxim 'once a colored house, always a colored house.' (87)

The implication is that between white tenants' unwillingness to be equal partners in a domestic space with black tenants, and landlords' reification of that attitude into a policy, the space itself becomes racialized. It is as though occupying that racialized space could re-define potential new tenants' own racial identity, rather than the other way around. As though the spatial association of living in a "colored house" could somehow make a new tenant, too, "black as an Ethiop."⁴³

Riis raises the stakes of this kind of spatial identity and its communicative properties, as well, by further suggesting that spaces can somehow transfer the qualities of the people who occupy them at one time to the people who occupy them at a later time. He considers the "Cheap Lodging Houses," for instance, to be "nurseries of crime" (50), which breed vice and corrupt honest urban newcomers into criminals. In this kind of space, "the contingent of ex-convicts returning from the prisons" (51) lies in wait to tempt the honest "young stranger" (50). Though

Riis describes the formerly honest man's vulnerability, co-habitation itself seems to make the criminal contagion inevitable. The ex-convicts bring criminality with them and infuse the space with it. In turn, the space marks and re-shapes the once-honest tenant. Riis reinforces this idea by specifying that "some of the most atrocious recent murders have been the result of schemes of robbery *hatched in these houses*" (51, emphasis mine). The residents must first infuse the space with this potential, but once they do, the space itself may re-generate their vices.

It is clear that the Ryders' peers are skeptical about the moral health of their household. As suggested by the notion of identity as spatially contagious, once figures such as Kate, Amelia, and their unknowable offspring have resided there—or Ryder himself, for that matter—their perceived corruption remains to affect any who might come after them, or near them. This idea of space furthers the sense that the "uncertainty" of potentially corrupted bloodlines causes trouble in both the present and the future, threatening a kind of socio-spatial takeover from the nativist point of view. Another way to see it, of course, is that non-normative individuals and their living spaces do shape future generations, but for the better, by pushing the delimited sociality of the nation towards greater diversity, equality, and exchange. The Ryder home's attenuated inclusion of black subjects both broadens and specifies the text's questions about the degree to which that space can be altered to accommodate social transformation and inclusion. It invites further investigation as well of the degree to which figures such as Ryder and Sophia, and the American traditions they represent, could be altered with it.

The Un-fathers

By playing off a racial history of complicated household relations, Barnes draws attention to the contradictions built into the original American ideals of how the domestic household,

individual and national, would be run—in principle and in fact. Such issues in fact form an explicit frame of reference, through Barnes’ characterization of those who *run* the household: Ryder and, perhaps even more importantly, Sophia. These figures are not only among those Barnes routinely connects to variations on the word and concept of “unfathering,” but they are each in their own ways parental authorities who by turns seem to neglect, exploit, and disavow their actual parental responsibilities in ways that align with charges Barnes seems to level at the broader paternalistic authority of the state. Barnes associates each of them with not only American foundations but with, ultimately, the false promises that complicated the national myth of inclusion all along. These associations reveal the stakes of inclusion in the domestic space of the Ryder household as in fact resonating at a national level.

Barnes links both Ryder and Sophia to American founding ideals and their built-in contradictions in a number of ways. From the beginning, she frames them through their Puritan bloodlines and establishes them as figures of American reform and philosophy movements: specifically Abolition, Transcendentalism and Free Love. She seems to do so, however, largely in order to show the limits of their commitment to the aspects of those ideas that relate to civic rights. To begin with, as discussed above, Barnes associates Ryder with issues of race, citizenship, and enfranchisement by first aligning his birth with the new beginning of the post-bellum nation. Ryder’s origins further align with national origins in that the formation of both entities can be seen as a function of language. Amidst Sophia’s obfuscations on the subject, she claims to have conceived Ryder semantically as much as sexually, explaining, “‘When I had a fancy to discover a transitive verb: “I lie—he lies—they lie” thus...was my youngest conceived’” (35). In *Voicing America*, Christopher Looby discusses the “American sense of nation fabrication as an intentional act of linguistic creation, the belief that the nation was made

out of words” (4). Ryder, too, has been spoken, or perhaps rather conjugated, into being, and his attempts to talk his way out of the trouble his lifestyle causes suggest that he also finds that “the legitimacy of the new...order [must be] sustained...discursively” (Looby 147).

Barnes places that lifestyle in the context of Ryder as a free-thinking, sometimes heroic nonconformist who evokes Transcendentalist notions of self-reliance and the importance of creating one’s own cultural traditions and practices. When Ryder escapes punishment for his children’s truancy by talking circles around the school authorities, we hear echoes of disobedient Thoreau in his comment, “I may warn you that Ryder as an outlaw is less trouble than citizen Ryder” (131). Even more prominent are the many hints of Whitman;⁴⁴ Ryder may not be quite “one of the roughs,” but he is indeed “[d]isorderly fleshy and sensual....eating and drinking and breeding” (Whitman 53). As Daniela Caselli notes, Barnes references Whitman through Ryder’s “pseudo-democratically enumerat[ing] all his multiple personalities” (211), among other things. His list of the myriad creatures and kinds he will father, furthermore, reads like a lost leaf of grass. Caselli describes the novel’s opening chapter, “Jesus Mundane,” as “a parody of a Whitmanian hero who has misread Emerson” (197), and Ryder himself is indeed that sort. He breaks with received frameworks, for instance, defining himself by “[speaking] up for an unfatherly given name” (17). Later, his Emersonian tendencies emerge in his approach to domestic space. Allying himself with American pioneering traditions, not to mention Bachelard’s alignment in *The Poetics of Space* of domestic and mental architecture, he constructs an important feature of his cottage in order to attain self-realization: his ladder “was of hewn cedar, by Wendell cut, on that day he had gone with his axe into the forest, that he might know his loft” (86). For all his originality, however, Ryder is only selectively self-reliant. Shortly after eschewing his fatherly name, he eschews self-sufficiency itself. His three-week stint of working

for a living leaves him vowing “Never again—oh never, never again to battle as a self-supporting unit!” (18). His sexual philosophy may foreground independence, but his embodiment of American originality rests on the support of other people’s labor—from his mother’s financial maneuverings to his wives’ obliging production of offspring. Where Whitman’s song of himself works to give voice to the “many long dumb” and “forbidden” voices of unheard Americans, Ryder aspires to fatherhood of all “those who can sing like the lark, coo like the dove, moo like the cow” and so on (210). He prefers multitudes who can do their singing themselves.

Similarly, Ryder both carries forward and corrupts the principles underlying his own project. His polygamy, which has clear civic stakes on its own, branches out from Sophia’s free love philosophy, which Barnes’ biographer Philip Herring links to the free love movement that flourished in the U.S. beginning in the 1820s and which was controversially but closely related to the suffrage movement. Sophia is generally taken as a figure for Barnes’ grandmother Zadel, who was an associate of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and likely a follower of Victoria Woodhull, the American suffragist who became the first woman to run for president, campaigning on the Free Love platform. Ryder’s philosophical genealogy, going back to figures such as Stanton and Woodhull, unites suffrage with an insistence on non-normative sexual and familial choices *as* civic rights. His polygamy, however far it has come from its ideological foremothers, ties the civic and political implications of plural marriage to those of women’s civic agency.

The distance his own brand of marital dissent has come from his mother’s, however, cannot be overlooked. While Sophia’s free love philosophy is intertwined with the push for social justice, Ryder’s is more selfish, however democratic its cast from time to time. Woodhull did not promote polygamy but rather women’s freedom to choose a monogamous sexual partner, to choose whether to pursue marriage and motherhood at all, and to end an undesirable

relationship or marriage. While Sophia's choice and sequencing of partners aligns with Woodhull's platform, Ryder allows himself two "wives" as well as unlimited additional sexual partners and offspring. He may rightly consider it his civic right to arrange his household and family however it suits him—and indeed, as the novel goes on, he must work increasingly hard to evade state regulation—but the text frequently shows his personal happiness to be at odds with women's personal and civic best interests. As one woman of Ryder's acquaintance reflects, Ryder "paints a rosy picture...of polygamy for...the *man*" (39). The text interrogates the experiment of a free love household, and it indicts Ryder for his hypocrisy and selfishness.

While Sophia's brand of free love may be the one that values women's rights, however, Barnes also portrays her as fairly ambivalent toward ideals of equality, liberty, and civic personhood for all. Initially introduced as having "in her the stuff of a great reformer or a noisy bailiff" (9), Sophia has the potential to either challenge or represent state authority, to reinvent or to reify the status quo. She supports but also disciplines. As the narrator puts it, "obedience she did exact; she loved, but she would be obeyed. She was the law" (16). Furthermore, as Sophia's strength is linked to her quintessentially American heritage, the great, hardy stock of early Puritans, hers is the authority of democratic founding, and she wields it by directing her subtle power at a notably democratic spread of targets, thus gaining influence over women "in every walk of life" (13), not to mention many rich men "and one of the Presidents of the States" (14).

Her connection to concerns about citizenship is more explicitly invoked through Sophia's somewhat ephemeral involvement in the suffrage movement. At one point, for instance, Ryder recalls soirees his mother hosted after a tour with Elizabeth Stanton (18), images of whom were among the "multitudinous and multifarious crayons, lithographs and engravings" (13) that covered the walls of Sophia's bedroom. That is, until she papered them over with newer

interests. In the journalistic work leading up to *Ryder*, Barnes directly addresses suffrage in a way that may similarly privilege the power of display itself over the particulars of the political investment. Her 1914 essay “How It Feels to Be Forcibly Fed,” for instance, publicizes a sensational personal account of the experience to which many hunger-striking British and American suffragists had been subjected. In the narrative, Barnes claims solidarity but also acknowledges that for her this experience is only an “experiment” (Barry 174). Barnes’ mixed motives here set the stage for her ambivalence towards suffrage in *Ryder*. While her work participates in the struggle by exposing the horrors the suffragists underwent, her investment may be at least as professional as political. While these things are not mutually exclusive, they temper the reminder, in *Ryder*, of the nation’s long disregard of women’s rights—and thus, the inconsistency of its realizing its own civic ideals—with the warning of some inconsistency in possibly Barnes’ and certainly Sophia’s attention to the cause.

Barbara Green takes an angle on the suffrage reporting that elucidates the contradictions in *Ryder*. She argues that Barnes may not simply make use of the spectacle of suffragists’ struggles so much as interrogate the nature and implications of the spectacle-ization, “shift[ing] feminist struggle from issues of citizenship to issues of representation and feminine spectatorship” (Green 78). In this piece, Green argues, the thing at stake is “not just spectacular femininity...but the status and authority of the gaze” (77). This tussle between female journalist and masculine medical authority puts Barnes in the visually unflattering and abjected position that leads her to state, “This, at least, is one picture that will never go into the family album” (qtd. in Green 77). Barnes identifies political maneuvering for women’s rights—whether through direct discussion of attenuated citizenship or the more oblique critique of masculine manipulation of the female civic body through the politics of seeing—as having no place in the

pages that represent family life. If we take *Ryder*, however, as anything like the “bawdy biography of [Barnes’] family” (Loncraine x) the critical audience generally assumes it to be, Barnes has, in a sense, created a family album that includes a version of that very picture.

Barnes presents not only the image of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but the notion of Sophia herself as the ambivalent suffragist struggling to maintain her own position. Not to mention the struggles of Amelia and Kate to protect their own domestic rights. Through those whose domestic legitimacy is threatened by state pressure to conform to normative social structures, we see a picture of contested belonging linked to identity categories that shape an individual’s relationship to the nation. The family album *Ryder* is so full of images, styles, themes, and embedded narratives, that Barnes as a citizen seems less trouble than aesthetic outlaw Barnes. The essential point, in this case, is her insistence on representation itself, as she draws attention to the gap between Ryder’s willingness to suppress women’s concerns and her own will to amplify them. But of course the opposite may be true, and citizen Barnes is causing the lion’s share of trouble after all by re-igniting the question of women’s reproductive rights in a text that laments the painful and dangerous consequences of maternity for marginalized female figures. Or perhaps above all, since the family narrative intersects in so many places with narratives of domestic belonging and the contradictions inherent to American ideals, the essential point here is that citizen Barnes and aesthetic outlaw Barnes cannot be separated.

While Barnes exposes the gap between American ideals and practices of inclusion, her work also criticizes the suffragists themselves at times.⁴⁵ She implies a similar indictment in her portrayal of Sophia, whose concern with women’s rights seems limited enough when it comes to the agency of the women in her own home. Importantly, Sophia expresses this limitation by changing the contours of other people’s domesticity, manipulating the relationships of individuals

to their domestic spaces. Sophia creates this situation by encouraging both Amelia and Kate to leave behind domestic spaces in which they have agency and authority in order to join the Ryder household, where they will always be subject to herself and Ryder as well as in competition with each other. Kate leaves the instability but also the independence of what seems to be her own houseboat to occupy the Ryder cabin (83). Amelia's material domestic sacrifice has even more tangible civic implications. Succumbing to the combined offer and demand of Sophia's "call me Mother," Amelia "make[s] over her legacy...that little property" to the former women's rights advocate and "thenceforth became an inmate of that house," and a "rapt" listener "at Sophia's knee" (33). Amelia gives her inheritance and, in large part, her agency, to the Ryders. She trades a possible future as a violinist who might command the attention of an auditorium/"house" for the role of audience imprisoned in the Ryder house. And of course, she thus also trades her "little property," and with it a measure of civic independence, for the role of wife and civic non-entity.

Since Barnes does not specify the year of this development, it is unclear exactly where Amelia stands in relation to property or immigration law. Until the mid-19th-century, a foreign (or, for that woman, American-born) woman marrying an American man would give up her own property and other rights under coverture, but eventually could gain American citizenship. In the latter half of the 19th century, U.S. citizenship would have been automatically granted through marriage. Though Amelia's timing would likely have placed her clear of coverture law, the fact that she "make[s] over her legacy" (33) is emblematic of the degree to which social custom and coercion perpetuated the dynamics of coverture well after the law changed. It is even less clear where Kate stands, as her property ownership status is unclear to begin with and her marriage status is pointedly left in question. These aspects of her civic status thus fall into the broader category of uncertainty that surrounds her. Since she too, however, is either an immigrant or a

first-generation American, and likely an unmarried one, she has potentially gained citizenship on her own. Furthermore, free of the potential pressure a conventional marriage would put on her holdings, she has maintained the right to own property and keep her earnings. Thus, within the Ryder household at the time of the narrative's events—and despite her understandable feelings about what her status as Ryder's wife entitles her to—Amelia, by becoming the “legitimate” wife and thus legitimate household member, becomes the one without civic legitimacy, while Kate, the “illegitimate” wife and dark foreigner to boot, retains her civic legitimacy by maintaining her status as domestic interloper.⁴⁶

Due to the ways in which they embody the intersection of gender, race, citizenship, and juridical frameworks, Kate and Amelia are guaranteed to be in one sort of civic bind or another, even without Ryder's help. As the representative of suffrage, the advisor of Ryder, and the initial facilitator of their domestic membership, Sophia would be the obvious advocate for their rights. And she does advocate for them to some extent, by interrogating Ryder about the effects of his actions. She soon indicates, though, that she will “stand between [Ryder] and retribution always,” prioritizing his wellbeing over any other concern (169). While she acknowledges his partners' suffering, her concern with women's rights—whether emotional, marital, or legal—will always lose to her concern with Ryder's needs and can be likened, in the end, to one of the buried images on her wall. Sophia may then also emblemize the broader shift in cultural attitudes toward free love that occurred between the time of her youth and the time of Barnes' writing. Earlier in the 19th century, utopian experiments in free love and other sorts of communitarian projects had flourished for a time. Following the Civil War, however, and thus notably following the birth of Ryder, leaders strove to re-establish social order and to bring freed slaves (and their necessarily informal marital arrangements), along with Native Americans now considered

potential citizens, into “civilized” society. Between these efforts and renewed concerns about the civic threats posed by Mormon polygamists out west, the post-bellum years saw a surge in states’ willingness to prosecute non-conforming marriages as well as birth control measures many saw as obscene and detrimental to the health of the Union.⁴⁷ It is perhaps no coincidence that around the same time “state authorities took up the banner the national government had been waving on behalf of legal monogamy” (Cott 127), Sophia, who in many ways symbolizes American public authority, moves from entertaining utopian possibilities of free love to enforcing conformity to the Christian monogamous model wherein a husband’s will automatically overrides a wife’s (even two wives’, ironically enough) agency.

And indeed, it is no small detail that Sophia’s ambivalent connection to matters of civil rights should be represented by Barnes’ portrayal of her layered walls, or that her civic potential should register through her kinship with the material components of domestic space. It is no coincidence, ultimately, that her significance as a civic figure in the text registers in her seeming to *be* one of those material components. That is, if we turn from reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Victoria Woodhull back to reformers such as Jane Addams or Jacob Riis, we are reminded of the degree to which many understood one’s civic identity, for better or worse, to be shaped by the quality and kind of one’s domestic space. As such reformers understood it, the number and arrangement of walls in a home signified both familial and national decay or threat. That is, the significance of walls in the ideology of housing reform makes it that much more striking that if there is a spare wall in the modest two-room Ryder cabin, it is Sophia herself.

As previously noted, the image of Elizabeth Stanton on Sophia’s wall was only one of a profusion of images of the objects of her admiration and disdain. This assembly of pictures made others “aware of the condition of her heart.” The walls, “like the telltale rings of the oak, gave

up her conditions.” They grow slowly with her: “for she never removed, she covered over. At forty these pictures were an inch deep, at sixty, a good two inches from the wall; the originals were, as she herself was, nothing erased but much submerged” (13). The idea that her walls at least represent and, in a sense, compose her, becomes clearer still when Amelia concludes that “Sophia, under her increasing flesh, kept memories of what the flesh now covered” (34). This woman is, like her wall, an accretion of memory, desire, former and newer selves, still containing all that is submerged in her. And she has accreted to become nothing less than “the law” (16). She not only embodies the structural supports of the cabin, but she also represents the ultimate authority within the Ryder household. Having brought both women into the family, she is the architectural element that then determines the degree of separation or, as it has turned out, the lack thereof between individuals and functions, and thus, by Progressive Era estimations, the moral and civic legitimacy of those in her purview.

If Sophia is, in a sense, the architectural element that could improve living conditions and thus turn inhabitants into good citizens, her presence suggests the possibility of a flexible and mobile kind of reform, however poorly realized. If, through Sophia, walls constitute the architectural law that produces good citizens, she signifies the possibility that a source of authority seen as fixed might indeed be transformable: the *law* that is Sophia could potentially be papered over with still more images and texts and more experienced selves. The *wall* that is Sophia is a dynamic agent influencing the citizenship status of those she contains and divides. Furthermore, Barnes has associated her agency with American state authority and founding ideals, specifically. Thus, her potential to be flexible—for better and worse—may also invoke the instability of the American promise that the civic infrastructure will support universal liberty.

By exposing the progressive potential and hypocrisies of both Ryder and Sophia, Barnes

reminds us that the ways in which individuals relate to each other within the home—and thus to the home itself—are deeply imbricated with the ways in which the individual relates to the nation. Furthermore, with the indictment of Ryder’s selfish and limited version of inclusiveness and the subtler critique of Sophia’s allowing her personal attachments to overwhelm her worthy ideals, Barnes moves from denaturalizing the “traditional” American family to exposing national failures to properly shelter and sustain the more varied families and individuals who nonetheless call it home. She exposes the distance between domestic ideals and lived realities of home and family, at once showing the civic implications of non-standard domesticity and critiquing domestic models that ultimately attenuate rather than support individual belonging.

The Rising Tide

As the crisis of accommodation mounts in the Ryders’ own faltering home, with outside forces threatening to punish Ryder’s legal and ideological transgressions, it becomes increasingly clear that the failure of his ideals will be costly for one or the other of the family groups he has thus far maintained. Eventually, those Ryder calls “the authorities of the state and the wiseacres of the nation” (169) successfully pressure him to re-form his family according to more traditional domestic conventions, and he feels he must turn out one of his partners rather than turn himself in. The narrative ends with a strong emphasis on this failure of Ryder’s initial ideal of inclusion. He spends the novel’s final chapter meditating painfully on the question its title poses: “Whom Should He Disappoint Now?” The question recurs four times on the last page of the text, three of which constitute their own paragraphs, with the final iteration ending the novel altogether. The insistence on the question of disappointment through exclusion belies its own uncertainty. It seems Ryder would disappoint whomever he sends away. Barnes has built into the text, though,

the grounds for questioning whether leaving that home would be the disappointment he means, and further, for questioning what the shift in domestic membership means for everyone involved. Barnes has, essentially, exposed the complications of the politically charged promise of domestic inclusion. She has also, however, complicated the exposé and built into her interrogation the means of thinking past the home's failure to accommodate.

Kate and Amelia have suggested the idea that the crisis must be understood not primarily as a failure to accommodate,⁴⁸ but rather as the difficulty of managing a domestic whole that depends on the social exclusion of so many of those it in fact allows to occupy it. They have suggested that the domestic frame of the nation may depend upon stigmatized subjectivities that have been, in one way or another, crowded out of the national contract, may in fact depend upon having them to stigmatize. What the home registers, ultimately, is not that material crowding is unsustainable but that the possibilities of material accommodation are inextricably linked with the possibilities of ideological accommodation. The treason may lie, then, in Barnes' exposure of the American ideology of domestic inclusion being also of course one of domestic exclusion. It may lie her willingness to re-think the categories of social legitimacy that shape the architecture of social hierarchy.

A further aspect may lie in the still more specific suggestion that the balance of socially included and excluded subjects is by no means stable but rather always subject to turnover. Lothrop Stoddard and others of his ilk feared a world in which the obligation to assist and protect "inferiors" such as Kate would result in the "superior" race sacrificing itself in the effort to care for the weaker groups. In *Ryder*, the family's fate, in a sense, represents this very scenario. Though Ryder does give in to the pressure to re-order his household, he does so by expelling his "legitimate" wife rather than his "illegitimate" partner. The text suggests, then, that not only does

the nation depend upon those it considers illegitimate in order to legitimate itself, but that it may well allow the illegitimate to *replace* the legitimate, maintaining balance through an ongoing cycle of abjection, legitimation, and displacement. For when the text comes to its restless end on the question of whom Ryder should disappoint, Barnes formulates it to imply expulsion as a repeating condition, asking again and again whom Ryder must disappoint “now,” presumably as opposed to the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that.

Importantly, she also refuses to answer. While biographical readings corroborate the suggestion that Amelia will be the one to go, Barnes importantly leaves the text hanging on the unanswered question of who will be abjected and who will be legitimated next. She indicates that not only might the legitimate and illegitimate switch places, but that it might be impossible to predict or control which populations or subjectivities could fall in either category over time. She thus recalls the text’s earlier accusation of the transgressive woman who has committed a kind of treason by “making of society an unknown quantity.” That woman is Barnes herself. The unanswered question of who will be the legitimate and thus socially dominant domestic subjects, going forward, could make of society an unknown quantity indeed and might be the very thing conventional readers “are not built to bear” (27). Barnes emphasizes uncertainty itself as the thing both routine and insurmountable—whether for readers, Ryder, or the authorities and traditions he and his mother invoke. She makes the point by letting the question end the text itself. As Kate has indicated, the Ryder home cannot exist without the illegitimate, and accordingly it is not narrated beyond the abject’s departure, whoever it may be. Barnes suggests that none involved are built to bear what Scandura calls this kind of indeterminacy: “the unstable cycle of disintegration and renewal, death and reanimation, repetition and repression, that is progressive modernity itself” (108).

Furthermore, Kate and Amelia indicate that the unfolding of these dynamics rests on a changeable material relation to the domestic space. And thus, in large part, it rests on the notion of social illegitimacy as an arbitrary construction rather than a racial or ethnic characteristic. By illuminating this sense of contingency, the text then suggests, ultimately, that racial and ethnic characteristics are themselves arbitrary constructions, and that we can re-construct them by locating ourselves differently. If legitimacy is inextricable from one's material relation to the house, and one's relation to the house is changeable, then domestic validity is based not on birth and legitimacy but on location, not on genealogy but on geography. Such an idea does not then mean that one may simply change one's status in society by walking in or out a door, or that familial or national excess can be managed by simply building on an extra room. It does, however, direct us to better understand domestic power relations and identities—on whatever scale—not by trying to determine the inherent worthiness of the subject at hand according to established social categories, but by interrogating the forces that govern domestic membership and access, and by noting that “legitimacy” may be a label applied after the fact.

Fine Issues All, And Molly Dance

Another aspect of Barnes' own treason lies not only in her suggestion that the house is already overrun, that it always already was, but that the point is not to judge or contain but rather to observe and represent the kind of home it is coming to be. Regarding the degree of Barnes' insistence on troubling constructions of belonging based on constructed identities, it is useful to turn, in final consideration, to the ways in which her aesthetics reflect similar concerns. Thematic concerns with excess, inclusion, and legitimacy register through the arrangement of the narrative as well as the arrangement of the domicile within it. There, too, we see an overabundance of

subjects in a space that can barely contain them. And indeed, by drawing on established literary styles without quite articulating the nature of her relation to them, Barnes raises similar questions, at an aesthetic level, about heritage and legitimacy. As Daniela Caselli argues about Barnes' intertextuality in *Ryder* and other works, "A persistent engagement with genealogy on the thematic level goes hand in hand with a refusal to either acknowledge a literary legacy or to produce lawful offspring, thus openly waging war against linguistic and literary legitimacy" (4). In regards to both domestic and literary legitimacy, Barnes' stance is anti-genealogical.

Rather than privileging literary or linguistic pedigree, she experiments in incorporating material others might see as invalid or undesirable. Her approach is distilled in the figure of Molly Dance, one of Ryder's mistresses and perhaps the one whose attitude most effectively trumps his own. Much to the distress of Ryder, who wishes above all to couch the variability of his progeny in the singularity of his parentage, Molly has many children, is not certain who has fathered any of them, and most astonishing to Ryder, doesn't care. None of her children "looked like, nor could one have pointed, with any certain finger, to its sire, or have penned it a tree of any proportions, above the sturdy root which was Molly" (191). Barnes expresses Molly's home as a chaotic but cheerful manifestation of the genetic variety present in both her family and her dog-breeding business: "The house of Molly Dance and the grounds around were as rambling as the trade. A great outhouse stunk and sounded with this breed and that; the kitchen stunk and sounded with her own," full to bursting with "the youth and the care-free spirits within" (193). Here, too, domestic crowding is associated with genealogical uncertainty, and Molly's approach to ideological and narrative genealogies underlies both.

As the "penning" of the family tree indicates, family-making, in Molly's house, is a matter of narrative-making—of ideological as well as sexual creation. And Molly, as the "sturdy

root” who holds all together, undoes the phallic imagery of sexual and literary fathering, becoming instead the woman-root who authors her great brood. Countering Ryder’s insistence on certain fundamental truths, furthermore—historical, biblical, literary, and etc.—Molly prefers to assemble details into whatever narrative suits her. She blithely re-constitutes the story of Genesis, for instance, and shows her disregard for realism, literary or otherwise, in noting that she’s perfectly willing, despite Ryder’s protesting adherence to established truths, to “think Henry James was a horse-thief, and Caesar the betrayer of Jesus” (194). In Molly, Barnes unites the lack of regard for certain patrilineage with the lack of regard for dominant, traditional narratives of origin, morality, and world order. Above the sturdy root of Molly Dance grows a tree that is, unashamedly, of her own making—whichever ideological or literal fathers have contributed to its flourishing.

Barnes shares with Molly the project of dislodging traditional narratives and defying the conventional dependence on the linguistic, sexual, and hermeneutical definite. One may, in fact, read Barnes’ use of form as a compositional version of Molly Dance’s revolutionary narrative and philosophy. They both privilege multiplicity and indeterminacy without expressing concern as to the relative legitimacy or illegitimacy of the elements they produce. Ultimately, by negotiating the influences and the generative force of multiple of literary fathers while still maintaining her own voice, Barnes becomes, like Molly, the sturdy root upon which rests a tree of, in fact, great and varied proportions. Just as Molly gets her children, Barnes gets her literary productions “when and where it please[s] her” (191), letting the text stink and sound with them all rather than rejecting formal elements which might be displeasing or problematic for her readers. In this regard, the anti-genealogical approach to narrative reinforces the text’s idea of locational legitimacy. The question is not whether one can prove one’s intellectually inherited

right to be in the canon by referring to the correct classical forebears. Rather, once one's words are on the page, one has arrived in and transformed the literary tradition whether its scions and critics approve or not. And thus the men of 1914 make room for the women of 1928.

Barnes expresses her own comfort with the possibility of narrative turnover as well, as *Ryder*'s more marginal Dr. O'Connor, for instance, moves from the fields and roads of this text to narrative centrality and the interior, intimate domestic space where Nora finds him in *Nightwood*. Or as the question "'Watchman, what of the night?'" (158) is mentioned in *Ryder* only to note that it goes unasked, but in the later text that query heads a chapter-length meditation—from Dr. O'Connor, no less—on just what the night means. Narrative turnover notwithstanding, however, we need look no further than *Ryder* to see that Barnes offers perhaps a final critique of the limitations of Ryder and his community's thinking in that where they must separate and categorize, she can include and juxtapose. In a world where the belonging of one depends on the abjecting of another, Barnes, like Molly Dance, offers a mongrel aesthetic in which varied subjects—from biblical injunction to joycean wordplay to parlor comedy—can co-exist without being parsed into categories of greater and lesser legitimacy. The trick, it seems, is to avoid the dichotomy altogether by filling the house without bothering about the lineage. To *Make of the Novel an Unknown Quantity*, we might say.

Indeed, we see the commitment to including the abject, unknown, and illegible in the text's visual critique of narrative and linguistic abjection. That is, as Paul West notes, the New York Post Office censored *Ryder*, and as a result, a furious Djuna Barnes and one of her Liveright editors had to "[sit] there in Paris removing passages having to do with bodily fluids" (243). In a sense, the novel itself comes to be defined by a narrative version of illegitimate excess. While the author sits in Paris, her novel is deemed a problematic subject in the U.S.

domestic literary household, a “dirty” and not entirely welcome figure on American literary shores. In the novel’s 1927 Foreword, Barnes explains that in place of the censored words she has used asterisks to indicate the expunged text, so that the public can “see the havoc of this nicety, and what its effects are on the work of imagination” (vii). She thus protests against American censoring authorities’ determinations of the narratively unclean, dysgenic, illegitimate.

Her text is indeed messy, in many senses. It is more of a Kate than an Amelia, as it were, in the house of American letters in general and modernism more specifically. It was not this work but *Nightwood* that Eliot endorsed, after all. But Barnes has posed a notion of legitimacy that insists on including the dysgenic subject and perhaps the willfully dysgenic narrative itself. As she states in her introduction and visually re-enforces with the textual effects of asterisks, a commitment to a valid aesthetic requires the presence of that which is deemed textually invalid. Contrary to authoritarian restrictions on what the text can incorporate, Barnes insists on representing what she is not allowed to articulate. This insistence signals an alignment between Barnes’ narrative strategy and the thematic implication that for all the problematics of excess, the answer is not the removal of the “illegitimate” subject but an acknowledgement of the importance, validity, and ever-changing definition of that subject. She suggests that the discomfort of crowding may not in itself be a sign of unhealth and cannot be dismissed by looking to a hierarchy of origins, but may in fact be a necessary, dynamic, and productive condition of domestic and literary life—a condition requiring not containment but ongoing inquiry, an ideology not of tighter regulation but of ongoing renovation, despite the prospective size of the contractor’s bill.

Notes

¹ Moving beyond criticism that considered it to be utterly without value, even Barnes' early champions mustered only a partial appreciation for *Ryder*. 1977, Louis Kannenstine, one of the earlier critics to attempt a recuperation of Barnes' aesthetic value, still dismissed her formal strategies in this early novel as nothing but antics, considering the text "a novel hidden in a massive stylistic display case" or at best, a training ground for later, better works (Kannenstine 37), at best a training ground for later, better works. Even Paul West's afterword to the 1990 edition of *Ryder*, ostensibly aiming to praise the novel, undermines it by reading it as little more than "a vehicle for wit," reducing Barnes' project to the following terms: "Writing fiction, she was a woman applying lipstick again and again to the same place, varying the hue or the emphasis, the shape and size but larding it on thick whenever she got the chance" (Barnes 244). These assessments, even in attempting to give Barnes the respect of serious consideration, reduce *Ryder* to a piece of stylistic frippery, a dazzling container in which, essentially, nothing much is contained. The gendered terms of dismissal, alas, border on suggesting the same about the author. Barnes' later work *Nightwood*, by contrast, has been much more widely appreciated, thanks in part to its introduction by T.S. Eliot, and the appreciation of that latter work brought some respect for its author.

² He cites, for instance Barnes' practice of "chronological dissociation" (36), her use of multitudinous historical literary voices, her suggestions of a skeptical and complex "attitude toward recorded history" (55), and her reflections on the limits of the knowable in human experience and relationships.

³ Phillip Herring, for example, draws on and refers to *Ryder* frequently throughout his Barnes biography, arguing that her explicit claim that *Ryder* was autobiographical makes it uniquely appropriate to not only often frame her life in relation to that novel but also to use it often as a literal source for biographical information. Fellow biographer Andrew Field also presents *Ryder* as largely biographical and uses knowledge of Barnes' private life to support readings of figures in the text. Even Kannenstine, who reports Barnes' outright refusal, in a letter, to confirm biographical links between *Ryder* and her own experience, refers to the text's "autobiographical" elements (Caselli 194). Ultimately, as Daniela Caselli argues, "[b]iography and autobiography are...problems rather than solutions in Barnes (194). Whatever the biographical connections, and however productive such resonances might be, the critical issue is that for many, biographical details have been used to foreclose rather than open more complex readings, and may ultimately distract from the text's full aesthetic and thematic significance.

⁴ Marie Ponsot, for instance, specifically refutes Kannenstine to argue that the novel's formal intricacies are carefully organized to structure the underlying narrative of a sexually-fraught relationship—if ambiguous in its particulars—between Ryder and Amelia's daughter Julie, the figure commonly understood to correspond to Barnes herself. Readings such as this show how aligning the biographical and stylistic valences of *Ryder* reframes its “incoherence” as crafted rather than accidental, thus revealing its validity as a substantial modernist text. They also highlight the importance of reading the intersection of sexual violation, identity formation, and the development of the artist, as significant and political content, not to be written off as irrelevant either because of its biographical or gendered inflections.

⁵ By the time the book was published, Barnes was living in Paris along with others of the expatriate modernist scene. She had, however, been born in 1892 in a small town outside New York City (generally taken as the model for *Ryder*'s location), where she lived through her teens, after which her branch of the family moved to New York city, where she resided until the early 1920s, when she moved to Paris. The novel, meanwhile, was published in 1928 by Boni and Liveright, a New York publisher also responsible for putting out a number of other modernist texts, as well as key Harlem Renaissance works such as Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). While it makes a great deal of sense to consider Barnes primarily as an expat modernist rather than as an American modernist, her own birth and time in the U.S., combined with the emphasis in *Ryder* on its specifically American, rural New York location, as well as the text's American publication history, demands recognition of her dimension as an American author and the text as part of an American modernist and, I'd suggest, American domestic fiction tradition.

⁶ See critics such as Douglas Messerli, Frances Doughty, Daniela Casseli, and Diane Warren, among others, for more detailed discussions of Barnes' stylistic references, or what Warren calls the “divergent voices and views” that make *Ryder* such a “polyphonic text” in Bakhtin's sense (50).

⁷ Of course, recent controversies over DOMA and California's Proposition 8, for instance, have made many people more aware of the government's involvement in the “private” realm of marriage lately than they may have been at other times. Even in the midst of such negotiations, however, many straight Americans continue to see the involvement of government in legislating *gay* marriage as right and necessary, while the ways in which government policy has shaped, supported, and incentivized their own unions continue to be invisible to them.

⁸ For a fuller exploration of how early American theorists' philosophy of political consent related to the model of Christian marriage, see Nancy Cott, *Public Vows*, Chapter One, "An Archaeology of American Monogamy," wherein she demonstrates that their "Montesquieuan thinking tied the institution of Christian-modeled monogamy to the kind of polity they envisioned; as a voluntary union based on consent, marriage paralleled the new government. This thinking propelled the analogy between the two forms of consensual union into the republican nation's self-understanding and identity" (10).

⁹ Indeed, politicians made use of this way of thinking; as pro- and anti-slavery factions were mutually troubled by polygamy, conflating the two allowed anti-slavery activists to gain support from those who supported slavery by playing on their contempt for polygamy (Cott 73).

¹⁰ If, perhaps, less so with the recently heightened attention to the issue of gay marriage.

¹¹ In addition to excluding all immigrants of Asian origin, this Immigration Act limited entry to the United States according to a quota based on national origins in an effort to maintain an earlier proportion of resident nationalities.

¹² Arthur Sherman started the "Covered Wagon Company" in 1929 in order to market his design of a tent trailer that featured canvas stretched over frames in covered wagon fashion. Though he went on to become one of the largest manufacturers of travel trailers in the 1930s and 40s, he was by no means alone. The trend had begun with wealthy individuals, such as the president of the Packard Motor Company, who built his own custom house car in 1915. In the following years, more and more middle-class people began to improvise house cars and tent trailers, using used car chassis and designs available in magazines, and an industry developed to supply them (White).

¹³ It is significant for Ryder's kitchen wagon to invoke such vehicles both because of their association with quintessential American pioneering and because of their role in a developing ethos of mobile domesticity. This trend indicated a broader kind of democratization as mass-production made mobile domestic spaces more affordable and ubiquitous, largely in the form of more and more modern, comfortable, and attractive trailers. As a later newspaper article would suggest, Sherman's legacy "ranks with that of his fellow Detroiter, Henry Ford. Ford's lasting achievement was to put transportation within the reach of nearly every American family. Sherman has done the same with housing" ("Alternative Housing"). In the decade following *Ryder's* publication, the truth of this statement would become clear as the Great Depression turned touring trailers from the "everyman's yacht" of middle-class vacationing to a fallback living space for the Depression's domestically dispossessed. Meanwhile, its rising popularity in the 1920s indicated a shift in ways of thinking about home spaces, as it offered a new way for people

to take a home space on the road with them, and thus to feel at home in a variety of geographic settings, interacting perhaps with different social spheres but from the comfort of one's own private, mobile domestic capsule.

¹⁴ Indeed, the size and ungainliness of such an item is illustrated in catalogues available in Barnes' time if not Ryder's. A 1916 Sears mail-order catalogue, for instance, offers a kitchen range that could otherwise be described as a massive cast-iron stove. While Ryder would not have been able to order such a thing—meaning also that we can't be certain of its particular dimensions and features—it is significant that Barnes' a theoretically unlimited number of Barnes' potential readers could have ordered identical kitchen ranges from a Sears catalogue. This entrance of mass-production into the material constitution of and practices within domestic space demonstrates the tension between Ryder's particularity, his perceived deviance from the norm, and the increasing degree to which American homes could be imagined as standardized and homogenized (Mcudeque).

¹⁵ The sense of threat also signifies in relation to Barnes' textual innovations, which bring literary styles from Chaucer to Joyce into the space of her own text. If Ryder's domestic play tends toward domestic destruction, what, we must wonder, does Barnes' textual play tend towards? I would suggest that these kinds of innovation are indeed related.

¹⁶ While it is not a primary focus of this discussion, the text begs further examination of the differences between these spaces and the importance of the issue of financial limitation as a factor in the family's mobility and further of Barnes' imbrication of the financial side of tenancy with the expression of domestic relocation as an instance of Ryder "pick[ing] up his bed" (128).

¹⁷ Though in this case bad housekeeping seems mainly to confirm both women's status as immigrants, who were often assumed to live in dirty and disordered spaces, it is also interesting to consider Amelia and Kate's domestic insufficiencies in relation to what Susan Fraiman calls "bad girl domesticity" (266). Primarily discussing contemporary figures such as Martha Stewart and Dominique Browning as well as a few precursors, Fraiman highlights such figures for the ways in which they represent "zealous domesticity...pried apart from conventional gender arrangements" (261). As Fraiman argues, conservatives and liberals tend to have different responses to the "proper, bourgeois domicile" as "essentially code" for idealized nurturing and sexually contained womanhood, but neither entity tends to question the "coupling of domesticity with normative sex/gender values" (278). These women, she contends, are interesting for their "ungrammatical linking of orderly houses and disordered femininity" (278). To return to *Ryder*, neither Kate nor Amelia quite fits the description. Amelia is the more conventionally,

properly feminine figure, but both live in a disordered house, and the traditional femininity of each is disordered by her sharing a home and sexual partner with the other. Still they represent an interesting inversion of the figure Fraiman discusses. Their own ungrammatical linking of orderly femininity (through their devoted—or at least prolific—mothering) and disorderly household presents a different but equally intriguing form of “oppositional domesticity” (274). The key issue in both scenarios is the disruption of an assumed alignment between femininity and domesticity—whether both orderly or both disordered. Here, too, it is striking for its representation, and potential encouragement, of a more complex relationship between the norms of domestic space, practice, and identity.

¹⁸ In 1907, this assignation of female citizenship to the nationality of her husband became consistent, as it was then coded into law. See Nancy Cott, *Public Vows*, Chapter Six, for extensive discussion of the interrelation of marriage and immigration policy between the mid-19th and early-20th centuries.

¹⁹ Indeed, Chapter 15, “Who Was the Girl?”, is entirely devoted to a playful meditation on the subject, questioning Kate’s identity and origins from what might be Amelia’s perspective. It interrogates Kate’s familial and sexual history, never answering its own questions so much as dismissing them as unanswerable: “Does it seem to follow that Kate-Careless was a bastard? It would seem to follow, and yet who can tell how craftily a child makes legitimacy prey upon her condition?” (83). It is unclear whether Kate is married or not, whether her parents were married or not, and what nations their bloodlines represent. Her mother is the “eagle-nosed Señorita from Cork...who heaved beneath ‘Non e vero’ in the streets of London” (81), an Irish contralto who also carries a mix of Spanish, Italian, British, and possibly Jewish signifiers. Of Kate’s father, we only know he is a Pre-Raphaelite painter. An earlier chapter, “Portrait of Amelia’s Beginning,” expresses Amelia’s heritage in terms of certainty, fixedness, and genealogy. Her familial origins have sat still, as it were, for the painting. Chapter 17, “What Kate Was Not,” follows this up with further questioning about versions of herself Kate might or might be or have been.

²⁰ Though beyond the scope of this discussion, Barnes’ consistent association of female sexuality and financial currency deserves further attention, both in its own right and in relation to the ways in which immigration policy, and in particular its treatment of marital status and gender, constructs extra-marital female sexuality as both depraved and foreign, excluding foreign prostitutes (or foreign women imagined as such, perhaps *because of* their ethnic or national identities) being an issue of major concern. See Nancy Cott, *Public Vows*, Chapter Six for further discussion of such issues.

²¹ Further, it is notable that the “Council” considers this production of uncertainty a transgression to be punished by branding. The body producing this problem is to be punished by “stamp[ing] Treason” onto it, or rather, inscribing it with reductive judgment. This punishment has the obvious, unsettling connotations of physical violence.

Furthermore, insofar as it suggests that the misbehaving sexual—and of course, in this scenario, female—body is a text on which judgment can be written, it draws attention to the intersection of textual production and sexualized bodies as a locus for negotiating both physical and ideological power. That bodily branding, though, has another sense as well, casting the body as a sexual product and its punishment as a boycott. When the Council warns that “none shall commerce with you,” the main implied valence is sexual: no one will mess with a known trollop. But the language is of business and society. To create uncertainty—whether through genetic pollution or inscrutable ideology—is to betray the nation. The punishment for this civic betrayal, appropriately enough, is commercial alienation—a concern of the public sphere that importantly invests intimate relations, in the text, with the economic conditions of society.

²² Again, sexuality, the construction of the household, and commerce are joined, as this material melt-down and restoration then further refigures the mother’s legitimacy as a valid unit of currency.

²³ As Edmunds notes, readings tend to “pose a contradiction...: in one [kind], Wendell Ryder stands as an emancipatory hero of nonconformity, while in the other, he stands as a domestic and sexual predator whose practices merit suppression” (“Narratives” 218).

²⁴ He describes largely to build up to a discussion about her subtler project in *Nightwood*, in which she promises and then withholds an exposé of the “queer underworld” of 1920s lesbian Paris.

²⁵ Also relevant here is Frances Doughty’s “Gilt on Cardboard: Djuna Barnes as Illustrator of Her Life and Work,” which discusses Barnes’ illustrations as part of a strategy to submerge her personal experience in earlier literary and visual traditions. Doughty sees Barnes’ artwork not as evidence of reference to the creative process but as a site of Barnes’ struggle with her ideological content, particularly in relation to sexuality, and thus, ultimately as a simultaneous strategy of allusion and diversion.

²⁶ While many scholars discuss the spread of suburbs and rural people’s fear of encroachment in various time periods, I am particularly indebted to Dolores Hayden’s *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* for her detailed discussion of how such spaces grew in tandem with developing transportation technology. She

breaks down the arrangement of spaces and their changes over time in order to complicate simplifications of urban vs. suburban vs. rural space.

²⁷ Veiller, for instance, believed that communal facilities in hotels or crowded apartment buildings led to “serious social evils” because individuals could not be held responsible for “sanitary abuses” of such spaces (Feldman 129). Providing sanitary facilities for each family, on the other hand, centered responsibility within the nuclear family (Feldman 130) and thus helped to produce more responsible individuals.

²⁸ Feldman lists, for example, “families’ practice of renting out rooms to strangers (an intrusion of the market into the sphere of the home); the combination of activities such as eating, sleeping and cooking in a single room; and the mixture of uses such as consumption, production, residence, and entertainment into one neighborhood” (131).

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this shift and the living room’s role in it, see Karen Halttunen, “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality.” This essay appears in a larger volume, *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, which offers a varied and substantial exploration of how to understand the rise of mass-culture and mass-consumption in American material life and cultural production. Its studies call for and help to facilitate closer attention to the role of material culture, “consumership,” and the stuff of everyday life in texts of various kinds.

³⁰ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that prisons resemble factories, schools, and hospitals, among other institutional spaces, and that in turn, such spaces resemble and in some ways perform the same cultural work of prisons in producing docile, functional individuals. In this case, the delegation’s concern with schooling the Ryder children parallels their concern with getting the Ryder family, as a whole to conform to cultural norms in their domestic lives.

³¹ Indeed, the concern of the neighbors in this instance calls to mind the (at least) “three levels of public authority” Nancy Cott describes as shaping “the institution of marriage. The immediate community of kin, friends, and neighbors exercises the approval or disapproval a couple feels most intensely; state legislators and judges set the terms of marriage and divorce; and federal laws, policies, and values attach influential incentives and disincentives to marriage forms and practices” (5). Even without the direct involvement of the government, the censure of the community, shaped as it is by more explicit political entities, ties this smaller-scale public judgment of “private” familial arrangements to issues of policy and criteria for full citizenship.

³² This move toward domestic standardization, combined with a emphasis on instructing sub-par or non-normative domestic subjects, could be seen in fact as an early form of what Ronald and Elsinga, in *Beyond Home Ownership: Housing, Welfare and Society*, describe as the contemporary trend of expanding homeownership in order to stimulate self-regulation amongst the citizenry, thus fitting with “emerging forms of neo-liberal governance” that prefer individualism to explicit government involvement (7-8). Primarily discussing the contemporary politics of home-ownership, they note that a common “feature of public discourses on home ownership has been an association between owner-occupied tenure status and improved citizenship. In this sense, too, increasing home ownership has represented a social project for governments and a means to re-moralize citizens as investors and property-owners. International research, especially in the United States, has accentuated the positive outcomes of the transformation from renter to homeowner.” This is true despite indication of only loose connections between tenure and behavior (8) and belies the degree to which a neo-liberal rhetorical emphasis on consumer choice is in fact backed by state policy that only supports the choice for renters to become homeowners, and not vice versa (9). Barnes suggestion of community and state-backed efforts to push deviant domestic subjects towards self-regulation and proper domestic performance, particularly within the time period of *Ryder*’s publication when the push toward home ownership was accelerating, shows that more contemporary neo-liberal approaches to home owner-citizenship are well-rooted in this early century discourse that links proper domestic practice to proper Americanness.

³³ See the following chapter for a more detailed discussion of the mail-order home phenomenon’s history and implications.

³⁴ The first “shelter magazine,” as Susan Fraiman identifies it, this popular publication arose in 1896, also notably in the time between the Ryder family’s narrative events and the novel’s publication. For further details on the publication and the significance of shelter magazines then and now, see again Fraiman’s “Bad Girls of Good Housekeeping.”

³⁵ In this case, Linda Brent is similarly integrated into the structure of the house, hiding in a compartment in the floor in order to be kept from discovery, a brief episode that foreshadows her later seven year ordeal of maintaining her attenuated freedom and with it any chance of civic legitimacy by eventual escape to the North. While Kate’s safety is not similarly threatened here, the significance of female agency being mediated *through* the domestic material structure shows the simultaneously restrictive and liberating potential of one’s relationship to the house.

³⁶ In addition to such echoes, Barnes indicates the scale of the family's trouble through the incident that precedes Kate and Amelia's flight from the household. Tension builds in the house as its inhabitants clash in various ways. One clash provokes Ryder to declare to his wives, "'There's nothing right in this house, or on this land, because of you and your children!' 'Who and whose children?' both women [then] exclaimed at once, not too sure which side of the fence he was on." He clarifies that he's speaking to Kate but that the fault is also Amelia's, as the children have her temper. In response to this, Kate "radiat[e] sudden joyous triumph, and Amelia, cold, stark Saxon quiet" (142), both of them responding in their eugenically specific modes of feeling. Although Ryder has invited this juxtaposition of families into the house, he suggests that the (eugenically-typed) new arrivals in the experimental utopia of his house have created a broader dystopic condition. Insofar as Ryder functions in the text as an American founding figure, as I'll discuss in more detail below, this tension could be seen as broadly symbolizing the discrepancy between the nation's exceptionalist attitude toward the freedoms of thought, expression, and practice it aims to protect and its history of either outlawing or more obliquely squelching practices—including those of the very mid-19th-century utopian communities Sophia and Ryder show some affiliation with—that are considered to be somehow deviant or threatening. See Nancy Cott, *Public Vows*, for more detail on the ways in which public authorities discouraged the non-conforming marital practices in such communities in the mid-to-late-19th century.

³⁷ This sort of tension is even more readily visible, particularly in regards to race, in *Nightwood*'s representation of the black, heavily tattooed circus performer Nikka. Some locate in this portrayal a subversion of "the white man's fetishization of black masculinity" (Hsu 47). Karen Kaivola notes, however, that while Nikka's body is indeed established as what Jane Marcus calls "'a text of Western culture's historical projections and myths about race'" (224-35), it is less clear "whether the text undertakes a critique of such projections" (179). In Barnes' work, this ambiguity—and indeed, the imbrication of her racial politics with her negotiations of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity and politics—neither begins nor ends with *Nightwood*.

³⁸ While I have been unable to find more intricate comparison of the two figures, it is not uncommon for them to be grouped together, in a more general sense, on the grounds of sexuality and artistic production. Cristanne Miller's *Cultures of Modernism*, for instance, includes both women in a long list of "lesbian or bisexual" American women who were "associated with modernism" (100). In *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber similarly lists both women as belonging to a group of bisexual women whom bisexual authors wish to identify or reclaim among their own.

³⁹ The only sorts he excludes, in fact, are the “bourgeois...as we now know them,” who seem in his opinion to lack flair (210).

⁴⁰ In this regard he aligns with national policy and eugenicist attitudes that encouraged citizens to have stable, child-producing families within their racial groups but actively discouraged inter-racial marriage and parenting that would mix and corrupt the perceived purity of bloodlines.

⁴¹ Examples include, for instance, Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). In *Passing*, Clare Kendry, passing as white herself and having given birth to one child whose whiteness secures her status, won’t take the chance of having a second child who might reveal her African American heritage. Clare describes the “terror” of waiting for the moment of truth at the baby’s birth, fearing exactly the sort of exclamation Ryder makes at the sight of his own child. White authors also explore such issues, one example being Kate Chopin’s story “Desiree’s Baby,” in an apparently “quadroon” baby is born to two parents who believe themselves to be white. In *Ryder*, Barnes plays with this trope in a way that at once highlights female agency and invokes cultural anxiety about miscegenation. As Werner Sollors points out in regards to these kinds of narratives, “Interracial family stories ... could ... help to clarify the relative importance of a father and a mother in giving shape to their progeny [as]... such stories may illuminate the (often-observed) fact that mothers as well as fathers matter for the makeup of their progeny” (41). The novel is concerned with nothing if not with the importance of mothers as well as fathers in conceiving, carrying, birthing, and raising children. Notably, though, in this case Barnes not only insists on the maternal role but on the mother’s genetic contribution and, with it, the potential for that contribution to join white and black bloodlines. In the main instance in which Barnes suggests any possibility of Ryder’s partners exercising extra-marital sexual agency, that possibility registers as miscegenation, as though female sexual agency automatically indicates a racial complication for the bloodline. Female sexual agency means uncertainty, and uncertainty means the prospect of racial mixture.

⁴² Among other things, all the members of the Ryder household, the momentarily misunderstood newborn notwithstanding, are on the same side of the color line. Kate and her line bear the Irish and Italian blood that might bring their full “whiteness” into question, as scholarship by scholars such as Noel Ignatiev and David Roediger on the construction of ethnic and racial categories suggests. They are not black either, however, and the issues of inclusion faced by immigrant and African American populations in the late 19th and early 20th century are distinct.

⁴³ Riis does mention a neighborhood where “the old ‘Africa’ is fast becoming a modern Italy” (87), but the possibility of the ethnic re-assignment of a space apparently extends only to groups such as Italians, whom Riis charges along with Polish Jews as being “the lowest of the whites” in regards to cleanly living in one’s surroundings (87). Overall, the space itself takes on a racial identity, and Riis leaves tenants and theorists to ponder the degree of its effects on new occupants.

⁴⁴ See also Phillip Herring (38) on Wald’s reading of Ryder’s Whitmanian associations.

⁴⁵ Green points out, for instance, that in her piece “Seventy Trained Suffragists Turned Loose on City,” a year before her own encounter with forcible feeding, Barnes mocks activists’ ways of educating women into “performative activism” (178).

⁴⁶ Though this would affect readers’ perceptions of Kate and Amelia rather than the characters’ experience, the legal context of the late 1920s, in which Barnes was writing, complicates each woman’s domestic status even further. In 1922, the Cable Act made many formerly dependent wives and daughters independent citizens. The 1921 and 1924 Quota Acts, however, required women to be independently eligible for citizenship or entrance regardless of their marriage status. Since being a wife or mother no longer guaranteed entrance, these legislations revealed the degree to which “[d]ebates over the implications of ethnic and racial difference among arriving immigrants and the consequence of women’s independent legal status collided with those arguing for the significance of women’s role in immigrant families” (Gardner 125). Kate and Amelia are negotiating their places in the Ryder home amidst a national negotiation of their places within the larger domestic-national community. In regards to both kinds of belonging, the relationship of the individual to the home—the nature of one’s domesticity—is essential in both mediating and reflecting one’s civic and national legitimacy. As Gardner points out, in the confluence of these laws, “[q]uestions of gender equality, marriage, miscegenation, reproduction, and race were intimately bound up in one another” (124). The shifting degrees and kinds of legitimacy at stake in the Ryder home also depend upon and reflect the complex ways in which such questions intersect in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁴⁷ Again, I am indebted to Nancy Cott’s extensive discussion of these dynamics throughout *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, which takes up each of these issues, among others, in great detail.

⁴⁸ Although this side of things is intriguing as well, in that it suggests there is something treasonous about acknowledging the limits of American bounty, whether in the social terms of immigration or the spatial terms of over-population combining with the end of the American frontier as conceived by Frederick Jackson Turner.

Chapter Three

“Honor Bilt”: Constructions of Home in *Absalom, Absalom!*

“You’re on the wrong lot.
Yours is across the railroad track.” –Title Card, *One Week*, Buster Keaton

“What’s he building in there?...We have a right to know.” –Tom Waits

The recent volume *Faulkner and Material Culture* opens with Joseph Uργο’s description of Faulkner, creator of some of the most resonant houses in American literature, hard at work on the house in which he himself lived. Rowan Oak is “a space where he not only wrote and lived, but which he constructed out of nothing, laying the floors, hammering the nails, plastering the walls, even destroying the work of others in his way” (xiv). Uργο notes that in a sense, Faulkner used words themselves as building materials, writing the outline for *A Fable* on a wall and thus making “the intellectual labor, in effect indistinguishable from the carpentry” (xiii). Of course, Faulkner did not build his house out of nothing, or even out of words, but out of ordinary materials, some, at least, purchased in the ordinary way of ordering them from Sears. As interesting and productive as it is to think of Faulkner building actual houses out of words, however, I would argue that his ordinary interaction with Sears turns out to be at least as interesting. Though Uργο relates Faulkner’s work on Rowan Oak to his beginning *Light in August*, it seems, that there could be nothing like the toil of rebuilding his house to help Faulkner design the *second* novel he gave the working title “Dark House.”

In that novel, retitled *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner adds perhaps his most fascinating dark house to the neighborhood of intriguing and complex American literary domiciles. As many of those houses do in more and less literal ways, Thomas Sutpen’s house in *Absalom, Absalom!*—as well as the more figural genealogical House of Sutpen he attempts to build along with it—ultimately collapses on itself, sending up a cloud of possible interpretations as well as

ash and dust in its wake. It has something in common with what Nick Carraway calls the “incoherent failure of a house” Gatsby dreams himself to death in. In Sutpen’s case, I would argue, the house’s incoherence is in fact key to its success, in a sense, even as it resists decoding. The figure of Sutpen’s house (along with the House of Sutpen) has been parsed through various disparate, if not quite conflicting, critical trends. These different vectors can be aligned, basically, with what Susan V. Donaldson calls the “dual characterization” of Faulkner’s work and public persona according to both pastoral and gothic frameworks.¹ In this chapter, I offer a new reading of that incoherent house and its ostensible failure that has bearing on those approaches but primarily refocuses our critical attention on the text’s position in the cultural history of domestic space in the U.S.

I contend that in order to both enhance well-established understandings and to open new avenues of signification in the text, we need to further consider not only the House of Sutpen, as it were, with all its gothic echoing, but the family’s actual living space, the “*h*”ouse of Sutpen, as a material phenomenon. We need to further consider not only what Sutpen’s mode of constructing it would have meant to his own Yoknapatawpha community, but also what it could have meant to Faulkner’s readers, who had witnessed, in the few decades leading up to the novel’s publication, the arc of a particularly poignant phenomenon in the history of American housing technology. I refer to the rise of prefabricated and “kit” houses, which provides an important cultural context against which to read the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen’s own house and the notion of design, itself, upon which he built it. I do not wish to argue that Faulkner’s purpose in this text is to directly comment on the house kit phenomenon. I do suggest, however, that the text both critiques and makes use of the particular cultural logic that the house kit embodies. That logic, essentially, is the notion that the right balance of standardization and

specialization of labor, materials, and functions would lead to greater productivity, happiness, and success—a notion that would come to be applied, in the early 20th century, to organizing domestic structures and the domestic practices they framed. We might also see in that balance of the specialized and the standardized a kind of paradox, in that the process depends at once on interlocking extremes of distinction and indistinguishability. In this chapter, I aim to identify the ways in which Faulkner stages this paradox of distinction and indistinguishability and offers a meditation not previously recognized on the implications of the logic of mass-production for his era's efforts to re-produce an antebellum social order.

To open such a reading, I find it more productive to look for a moment not to the domestic spatial genealogies of the American Gothic or the American Renaissance or even American modernism, but to a bit of 1920s pop culture that may be to *Absalom, Absalom!* what the iconic banana peel is to *Light in August*.² I begin with an example of silent film that may seem at first to be far removed from Faulkner's world—not to mention Sutpen's—but nonetheless offers a poignant if curious foundation for reading *Absalom, Absalom!*. In fact, as Jeffrey Folks notes, Faulkner frequently referred to silent film from early on in his work, and in the couple decades before writing *Absalom, Absalom!*, “frequently spoke of his characters and of himself as ‘the little man’ or ‘the tramp,’ a reference to the persona made famous in Chaplin’s films” (173). Though Faulkner singled out Chaplin, we might also consider the possible influence of Chaplin’s contemporary Buster Keaton, whom film critic Ty Burr calls the “poker-faced modernist” as compared to Chaplin’s “sentimental sensibility” (Burr).

In 1920, Keaton launched his solo career with the short silent film *One Week*. This 20-minute two-reeler uses vaudeville structure (Knopf 41) to follow a young newlywed couple through the shenanigans that ensue when a wealthy uncle gives them, as a wedding gift, one of

the mail-order kit homes that had recently been made popular by Sears & Roebuck among other companies.³ The film follows Keaton's constantly frustrated efforts to put the house together, and these exertions end in the wildly mismatched and distorted house, improbably enough, being run over by a train. Keaton explicitly ridicules here a Fordist logic of domestic construction. The film was inspired by the Ford Motor Company's *Home Made*, a promotional film about "do-it-yourself" prefabricated house kits (Knopf 40), and Edward McPherson describes *One Week* as a "hilarious riff on the Ford Motor Company's modernist faith, with its prefabricated happiness and cheery industrial optimism" (75). A villainous spurned suitor—(is there any other kind?)—secretly mis-numbers the house's component parts, but Keaton's relentless and unwitting protagonist assembles those parts into a stable, if wildly disordered and ultimately unsustainable, final product. The ideological riff McPherson describes manifests, finally, in the unorthodox shape of the end product and the still greater disarray of its eventual destruction, a destruction the newlyweds move on from with relative cheer at the brief film's end.

I would like to suggest that in a number of ways, though with a distinctly different tone, the film prefigures Faulkner's portrayal of Sutpen's own tragic farce of a house-building project and its implications for the sort of faith animating that project. Though far separated in space, time, and circumstance, the houses face an array of similar challenges—from human interference in the form of problematic suitors, to the vagaries of storm and swamp that represent the natural world, to the threat of embodied modernity itself (in the form of a train) overtaking the project and smashing it to pieces. While the detailed exploration of these alignments would constitute a detour, even their brief comparison suggests that the confusions and collapses of the House of Sutpen—often read as gothic—may also have a foot in the door of vaudeville along with Keaton's crazy kit house, and more importantly, may signal the broader follies and possibilities

of modernity that frame and permeate *Absalom, Absalom!*'s negotiation of racial and regional conflict.

And indeed, this negotiation is my ultimate concern. My goal in these pages is twofold. First, I aim to show that in reading *Absalom, Absalom!* we miss a vital interpretive framework when we neglect the text's position in a cultural history of home-building. This context illuminates Faulkner's concern with the role of local material space, and in particular, of the construction of domestic space, in constructions of self. For, as I will argue, the house-building phenomenon that Keaton ridicules, along with the (Fordist) modernist faith it represents, constitutes an important context for Sutpen's building as well, and for what we might call Faulkner's (literary) modernist faith.⁴ Second, I show that this engagement with the spatial construction of the social self allows us to see more clearly the contours of Faulkner's ambivalence toward—rather than rejection of—modernity. In particular, Sutpen's rise and fall, as mapped onto the rise and fall of his house, seems to suggest the shortcomings of a faith in modern logics of production; however, I would argue that the text overall poses this downfall as a productive one. For, not only does that downfall dismantle the home as a particular material space that had reified a violent racial order but more generally, the text shows how the material disorientation of modern production, alongside the conceptual disorientation of modernist narrative, can unseat a localized geography of racial power.

That localized geography is something we might think of more commonly as the plantation itself, the arrangement of houses and surrounding lands that materially framed the slave economy of the South and, perhaps more importantly still, became essential to a mythologized Southern past that would, as Grace Hale argues in *Making Whiteness*, help to re-solidify white supremacy in the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction. A closer look

at the house itself shows *how* he throws a wrench in the works of retroactively constructing plantation life as harmoniously racially integrated. By highlighting both social and spatial acts of domestic composition—and further linking spatial and social composition to narrative composition—he presents the home as the material space that sustains the constructed continuity Hale identifies between a plantation past and a segregation present. By dramatizing the construction of such a space from scratch, Faulkner stages as well the construction of the mythology associated with it. By tearing it down, he codes into Sutpen's failure the tragic failings of not only the spatial form of the plantation domestic but the social forms and narratives built into it, and indeed, the very alignment of social and spatial order that this mythology makes use of. Faulkner's narration of this process comes into relief when we read it against the cultural history of house-building that grounds his narrative, noting the developments in architectural history that were brewing as Sutpen built, and focusing more fully on the eruption of mass-production of domestic space that spanned the years between the primary present moment of the text's narration and the historical moment at which Faulkner wrote the novel.

While this attention to architectural history importantly highlights the alignment between spatial and social construction in the text, it also brings us, more vitally still, to the text's concern with the construction of race. A central issue here is the text's engagement with the paradox of indistinguishability and distinction. In its social form, this paradox describes Sutpen's struggle at once to stand out and to blend in, so as to position himself as at once a typical and exceptional member of the class he aspires to. This paradox also has a material and technological parallel, as it is central to the logic of the mass-production—which depends upon the use of interchangeable parts that have distinct functions which, when assembled in a careful order, produce mass quantities of theoretically indistinguishable final products—or, most importantly for my purpose

here, homes. Turning back to the social, the spatial-material paradox, in turn, offers a model for thinking through the text's portrayal of the panic surrounding racial identification, a process that is also at once plagued and redeemed by that very paradox of racial in/distinction. All of these issues come together, in the text, in Sutpen's house-building project—which requires him to constantly negotiate the tension between social, racial, and material distinction and indistinguishability, and which, in light of the advent of mass-produced domestic spaces in Faulkner's time, draws attention to the ways in which the technology and ideology of mass-production have come to constitute our most intimate spaces and the less tangible social frameworks they sustain.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, this interplay of the in/distinguishable characterizes as well Sutpen's attempt to understand and perform a desired position in a social order that similarly depends upon just the right sequencing and arrangement of distinct and indistinct parts, just the right arrangement of individuals, some of whom are accorded human agency while others are understood as an abstracted, subjugated labor force composed of interchangeable automatons, or of mere functions and materials. By examining the spatial dimension of this paradox of in/distinction, we can see how the convolutions of the text destabilize not only the oft-noted *temporal* sequence that shapes our understanding of both individual stories and the large-scale narration of history, but also the *spatial* sequencing that undergirds the distribution and legibility of social power, governing race relations among other social dynamics that depend on simultaneous constructions of individual and mass identity. And here lies the possibility of redemption as well, for the disorder that registers as the collapse of the spatial and social vitality of Sutpen's house can also be seen as a step towards unsettling the entrenched white supremacist social order. Thus, domestic instability in the text may represent a step towards truer democracy

by way of dismantling the social space of the plantation and the broader geography of racial power epitomized by slavery.

In order to unpack such implications, we must begin with a closer examination of Sutpen's relationship to domestic space throughout the novel. There is no question that architectural details matter to Thomas Sutpen and his narrative.⁵ The traumatic moment that launches the "design" that shapes the rest of Sutpen's life occurs when a house slave sends his young, poor, barefooted, white self away from the front door of the big house on the plantation for which Sutpen's father works. As Priscilla Wald suggests, it is through this "drama of the front door" (49) that Faulkner distills the issue of white southern fear of dispossession, the fear that "as soon as the Negro enters our house by the front door," interracial marriage and miscegenation will immediately and inevitably follow, and that any social progress on the part of blacks will necessarily come only at the cost of whites (Wald 39).⁶ I would add that by highlighting the social significance of physical movement through the architectural element of the doorway, Faulkner draws attention to the role of material domestic spaces in mediating such social dynamics. Indeed, this moment crystallizes the text's broader emphasis on the role of domesticity in the construction (or, as the case may be, de-construction) of the social order. More specifically, when young Sutpen must confront the politics of access to that "smooth white house" (Faulkner 188)—a domestic structure that manifests a higher class position and a greater degree of "whiteness" than he himself can claim—he signals the importance of domestic structures in registering and even constructing social status and identity.

In response to this trauma, Sutpen labors to bury his origins under a house "even bigger and whiter than the one he had gone to the door of that day" (Faulkner 209) and to fill that house with his own progeny. Wald suggests that for Faulkner, the front door imagery represents a

larger societal fear that conceives of an interracial future, like the one Shreve predicts at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, as an apocalyptic one. In response to a local instance of these issues, Sutpen becomes determined to assert control over various larger forces in order to secure his own social validity. “The terms that [Sutpen] understands as the prerequisite for social existence,” Wald notes, “are history and genealogy, and he learns what they are: the power to tell a story in the present that will construct a past—hence, a social existence—not only for the sake of his descendants, but for his ancestors who survive (and prevail) only through that story” (44).

Sutpen also learns how important domestic structures can be in making legible the story one wants to tell. As Noel Polk points out, Faulkner dismantles any easy notion of history or genealogy in this text in order to challenge the “arbitrary structures of power and privilege that order our lives,” and genealogies are important because they are “culturally, historically, economically, and, most of all, legally essential instruments by which we document the passing of blood and of blood’s corollary, property” (Polk 10). Property being the material component of blood relations and family history, it makes sense that if Thomas Sutpen wants to write himself and his family line into history, he ought to use a colossal estate to do it. If we are to fully examine Faulkner’s assault on the arbitrary power structures associated with history and genealogy, we must also consider ways in which he pulls apart their spatial corollary, Sutpen’s property, the house itself.

The notion of the house as both place and people has been well-discussed, and a domicile like Sutpen’s can easily be folded into readings of the house as a gothic symbolic structure. It has been compared, for instance, to Poe’s House of Usher, which also conflates material structure and family line (Chandler 249). Others, meanwhile, have read the house through its connection to Greek revival architecture and its classical connotations.⁷ I suggest we think of it, though, as a

piece of a different whole—as a link to the history of house-building itself, and in fact to a particular moment in that history when mass-production enables the democratization of socio-spatial status by facilitating widespread access to building technologies and their final products. A key instance of that potential domestic democratization is the development of the early 20th-century mail-order build-your-own-home kit. As a phenomenon with which Faulkner's contemporary readers would have been familiar, it provides an important context against which to read Sutpen's own house and notion of design, which ostensibly fight cultural dynamics of modernization, mechanization, and standardization but in fact, I would argue, ultimately express and depend upon their logic.

A Nostalgia Machine for Living In

The kit home developed in the 1890s, when Sears & Roebuck and a handful of other companies began to sell assembled building materials through mail-order catalogues.⁸ Stylistically, this kind of house grew out of an ongoing trend in American architectural history towards the mixing and matching of established styles to suit the individual. In the early-mid 19th century, landscape architect and designer Andrew Jackson Downing, for instance, ushered in a new phase of such mixing through his writings and house pattern books, which encouraged readers to express their own personal style by remodeling or replacing existing neoclassical houses to reflect the “Rural Gothic” and “Italian” among other styles. Meanwhile, as Downing's influence continued to blossom, mass-production techniques for building developed throughout the late 19th century. At the confluence of these dynamics, Dolores Hayden notes, “[s]tandards varied widely, but what was considered modern ‘American’ construction was often a sentimental Victorian hodgepodge of forms borrowed from Gothic, Renaissance, Egyptian, and other

traditions. It could be lively, but it never had the integrity of older New England houses, which were often said to lack ‘style,’ as in Andrew Jackson Downing’s day” (78).⁹ The early twentieth century saw this hodgepodge domestic design meet advancing building technologies in the flourishing mail-order market. “Local vernacular building traditions” and architecturally unified neighborhoods gave way, much to the dismay of architectural societies, to the mixed styles of new settlements full of houses made of mass-produced parts, where a “Spanish colonial might rise next to a Craftsman bungalow or a New England Cape Cod” (Hayden 100), and each of these likely to be a somewhat eclectic realization of the primary style by which it was identified.

The kit homes produced by Sears and other companies distilled and perpetuated these trends, both technological and stylistic. They were characterized by an eclectic historicism that diluted and economized established styles for easy consumption by people looking to arrogate the desirable connotations of such styles to themselves. In doing so, they took part in a broader early 20th-century trend towards playing up the capacity of constructed and decorated domestic space to reflect and reify the individual’s membership in a desirable cultural history. This trend took various forms, including the rise of house museums preserving the homes of iconic figures, domestic period rooms in museums, and displays of historic domestic settings and styles at fairs and exhibitions. Elizabeth Festa explains that “historic domesticities made the notion of an idealized past tangible by embedding the social values and aesthetic sensibilities of earlier Americans in the architecture and design of their homes and furnishings” (74). Rising after the Civil War and reaching a peak in the 1920s, “the movement was propelled by the belief that civic homes could shore up the increasingly tenuous boundaries of national identity and provide idealized pre-modern settings for visitors amid the deracinating effects of an emerging modernity” (Festa 74). The preservation and replication of such historic “paradigmatic interiors”

(Festa 74) and related furnishings worked alongside other social forces such as the settlement house movement both to “preserve culture” and to “promote the proper cultural orientation for new citizens” (Festa 80) through the management of individual and group domesticities.

In addition to promoting American values to visitors, these historic (or historic-styled) spaces increasingly became focal points for commodification and self-expression. As “the historic interior’s role shifted from one of preserving the material traces of iconic figures to modeling these new styles for private use” (Festa 75), mass-production facilitated the large-scale replication of historic furnishings and styles. Falling in line with what Halttunen describes as a shift towards more actively using domestic interiors to express personality (183), material expressions of the American past increasingly came to function as “vehicles of modernist self-fashioning” (Festa 75). As these materials and settings had long functioned to preserve and promote specifically American history, character, and values, the modern mass-production of these trappings of a “shared domestic mythology” allowed for the associated civic and cultural “identity to become attachable to many persons” (Festa 81). It is this idea of transference that a growing number of house museums, open-air historic villages, and other such tourist sites played on as they increasingly marketed historic replicas or styles. And it is the same notion that fueled the design and marketing of mass-produced domestic spaces, such as the Sears kit homes, that incorporated historic styles.

As Dolores Hayden and others have suggested, the mail-order homes seem to offer, through their historic features, names, and accompanying ad narratives, to include the buyer in elite cultural groupings or allow him or her to somehow inhabit what are imagined as better places or times, whether within or beyond American borders. The cozy “Heather” idealizes the “plain, simple, little Home as the preferred bastion of “[s]ome of the greatest men in America” in

their “happiest” days (Banta 257), while “The Ionia” evokes classical splendor. “Stone Ridge,” too, with its pleasant hearth, is endorsed by “Cicero” and his words on the delight of “one’s own fireside” (Banta 260). Back from Rome to “Homeville,” as another model is called (“Sears Roebuck Kit Homes”), “The Americus” is a “dignified, substantial” space in which “any American” can feel “proud” and “comfortable” (Banta 263), and “The Betsy Ross” “combines the charm of the pure Colonial exterior with all the comforts and economies of the up to date bungalow” (“Sears Roebuck Kit Homes”). At the other end of the spectrum, “The Ashmore” stands out as the “Aristocrat of Bungalows” (“Charlottesville Kit Homes”). Meanwhile “The Lebanon,” “The Rosita,” and “The Ardara” (with its “many unusual attractive features,” no less) offer hints of distance and difference, while “The San Jose” wrangles the best of “Old Spain...combining the beautiful Spanish mission lines with the latest idea in a splendid floor plan” (“Sears Roebuck Kit Homes”).

As Hayden argues, the house models’ names speak to “the desire for assimilation” (106) in terms of both class and identity, with humbler designs trumpeting their resemblance of costlier homes and labeled with “upper-class white Angle-Saxon protestant names” (110), while those suggesting difference quickly incorporate it into the lines of the ideal modern American bungalow. Catering to Americans of diverse standing, the house kits topped their offer of modern material convenience only with their promise of self-realization, or rather, realization of the purer, wealthier, more talented or patriotic self one wished to be. If, as the “Magnolia” copy notes, “Longfellow composed his immortal works” in a Cambridge house bearing a “close resemblance” to this model, why couldn’t you? (*Sears Archives*).

In many ways, the house models, pitched largely to play on the aspirations of middle- and lower-class potential home-buyers, democratized material access to improved status and the

display thereof in a time when, as discussed earlier, organizations such as the Own Your Own Home Campaign were busy tying the ideal of homeownership to normative American subjectivity. Such associations were coded into house plans and catalogues, which rose in popularity as Sears, among others, focused its attentions on selling mail-order homes through its Modern Homes Department in 1908. Between 1909 and 1912, Sears took its business a step further by buying processing facilities so that it could cheaply acquire, store, and precut lumber before sending it on to home-buyers in an even tidier package. Around this time, the company also began to offer loans that drew in even more customers, thus increasing access to the homes they sold. All in all, the homes focused a sense of universal access to a material space that would imbed the buyer in an array of civic and cultural values.

To situate the text in regards to the kit home phenomenon's chronology, Sutpen's home construction in *Absalom, Absalom!* begins and ends in the 1830s, when pattern books were available to some American home-builders but pre-cut kits were still a ways down the pike. Indeed, Sutpen had no such option, orders no such thing through the mail, and conducts his own material domestic project through a mythically extreme version of the sort of hard labor the home kits were designed to circumvent.¹⁰ However, the social project his home-building participates in works very much on the logic of a mail-order home and its implication that a certain social subjectivity comes along with the pre-cut package. Furthermore, the *text's* building project—constructing the narrative which constructs Sutpen's "H"ouse-building project and the "h"ouse it produces—opens with Rosa Coldfield and closes with Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon in 1909, as the kit homes were coming into their own. Bracketing the kit homes' heyday on the other side, Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936, just as the mail-order kit home business was folding under the economic pressures of the Great Depression. Read

through the lens of this later cultural moment, Sutpen's project hints more and more at a kit home mentality, while his downfall seems more and more to correspond to the national-domestic disillusionment implied in the collapse of the kit home industry.

Again, I do not suggest that Faulkner explicitly addresses the house kit phenomenon in the text. Rather, he stages and denaturalizes the related ideology, quite popular and well-advertised in the decades leading up to the text's publication, of home-building as an easy and reliable path to building the ideal self. And further, he plays with the logic of the mass-production technologies upon which this ideology of easy domestic-self-construction relies. The critical idea here is that through the proper-management of highly specialized and effectively standardized parts and functions, domestic self-realization (along with all its related perks in terms of social belonging and civic inclusion, as discussed earlier) could be available to the masses. Ideas along these lines appeared in different forms in the time *Absalom, Absalom!* spans, from Taylor's theory of "scientific management" of workers to Ford's streamlined mass-production of standardized products. As Martha Banta notes, Ford never did produce ready-made houses, but designers of such houses did aspire to "emulate Ford's formula for the rapid assembly of standardized components rolling off the line on a mass scale" (215).¹¹ She also explains that "Ford bequeathed to American house ideology" a notion of how to standardize the American worker and family according to three basic, inter-linked factors: "To implement the standardization of one element in this basic triad," she states, "was to attempt the standardization of all three: the worker, the citizen, the single-family home" (215). Designers of kit homes provided the plans for such homes. The houses became, then, both tools and registers of a culture of standardization.

Unlike many a Ford employee, Sutpen does not build his house to demonstrate allegiance

to the working class but rather to align himself with the southern aristocracy. Upon first glance, he seems more concerned with distinguishing himself than with fitting into the mold. In many ways, Sutpen's building process is everything that the Fordist single-family home is not. More to the point, however, we could see him as embodying the tension between an American desire for distinction and investment in the standardizing logic of Fordism. As David Gartman points out, Swiss architect Le Corbusier "declared that 'a house is a machine for living in' and should be designed and manufactured 'on the same principles as the Ford car I bought.'" Gartman also describes, however, the American ambivalence toward this perspective, in that "American architects pioneered the use of standardized industrial materials like steel and concrete, but they generally concealed these machine-made materials under historic styles or organic ornamentation" (25-6).

While kit homes by Sears and other manufacturers may have had broader popular appeal, there were also important exceptions to the design trend they represent, as not only Le Corbusier but American architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller also aimed to take advantage of mass-production to streamline domestic design. For instance, Wright's "American System-Built Homes" (developed between 1912 and 1916) and Fuller's Dymaxion House (1929) similarly looked to mass-produce low-cost, modern housing for the masses. While Fuller's efforts remained more conceptual, Wright's system, like the Sears kit homes, supplied builders with affordable kits of pre-cut and assembled materials, working to bring an ideal mix of art and functionality to the masses.¹² The final product in these cases, however, would be one that exposed and commented on the modern building process and materials that made it rather than concealing its modernity beneath a veneer—or rather even collage—of historic ornamentation. Wright's system, furthermore, highlighted individuality and customization. Unlike the other

mail-order houses, which were designed by unnamed architects, Wright's designs carried the specific connotations of his own name with them. Furthermore, though buyers would begin with a standard model, Wright emphasized the importance of individuality as an American ideal and hoped buyers would thoroughly customize their kits, thus allowing for a utopian meeting of modern technology and traditional ideals of democracy (Lilek).

Wright's system, however, was largely sidetracked by World War I, with only twenty-five houses being built before getting stalled by the diversion of materials and labor to the war effort. Fuller's interwar design, meanwhile, produced only two prototypes. Being neither as commonly employed nor as widely seen as the Sears-style homes, modernist visions such as these, overall, did not dispel the prevailing tension Gartman identifies between the increasing use of modern materials and processes, and the desire for a visual style that hides such things behind a veil of nostalgia. Sutpen, for one, does seem to privilege a unified historic style over the more varied modernist architectural aesthetics emerging in his author's time. And indeed, I would argue that the Sears-type kit home, which represents in its own way the quintessentially modern American domestic space—embodying as it does the tension between the modern and the anti-modern—is the perfect framework for understanding the balance Sutpen labors to find between distinction and anonymity, between the specialized and the standardized. Ultimately, however, both styles are essential to understanding home-making in the text. For, while Sutpen seems to work on the Sears-style model of pinning domestic fulfillment and social performance to spatial nostalgia, *Faulkner's* narrative construction has more in common with Wright's emphasis on democratization of domestic life through the exposure of the construction process.

* * *

“Positively Guaranteed”

As for Sutpen’s own efforts, while his project may seem at first to be at odds with the kit home mentality, many of the superficial disparities point us to the ultimate fact that Sutpen’s grand “design” depends, ultimately, on the exact sort of formulas of space- and self-construction that lay at the heart of the house kit’s appeal. In regards to both process and product, I would argue that he follows the kit home model in at least three key ways. The first is the suggestion that the building process is both facilitated and to some degree elided all together by the process of reading. The second is the notion that home-building, and indeed, the building of the self who will eventually live in that home, works according to a straightforward and guaranteed formula. The third is the idea that the aforesaid formula, if followed properly, can insert the home-owner/builder into a history that he or she might otherwise be unable to access. As the kit home ad copy assures readers, all this and more can be theirs if they will only take a moment to read.

That is, the kit home promised convenience, predictability, and quality at a range of manageable costs, through the modernization, mechanization, and scientific management of the building process. The ads suggest, in fact, that the buyer need hardly take part in the building at all beyond reading the catalogue from which he buys the kit. Consider, for instance, “Modern Home No. 115,” one of Sears’ earliest offerings, the copy for which proclaims: “\$725.00 and Our FREE BUILDING PLANS WILL BUILD, PAINT AND COMPLETE, READY FOR OCCUPANCY, THIS INVITING \$1,100.00 SIX-ROOM COTTAGE. We tell you on page 2 how we furnish, free, the plans for this house, or any of the many houses shown in this book.” It seems that the house will simply materialize, “ready for occupancy,” at any moment, coming into being perhaps with something of the same dissociative magic by which Sutpen “rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his

mansion, apparently out of nothing” (Faulkner 7). The ad copy for Modern Home No. 115 practically removes the buyer from the building process; the money and plans themselves take care of everything. And lest buyers fear sacrificing quality, the ad assures that “[w]hen planning our houses it is a question of how good, not how cheap,” a statement “easily proven” by a quick look at the next page. Furthermore, Sears “positively guarantee[s]” materials, speed, affordability, satisfaction, and even protection from the cold, hard world of “unscrupulous contractor[s],” all for the effort of just turning a page (*Sears Archives*).¹³

Insofar as building a kit home is a reading process, it is notable that Sutpen’s grand “design” develops in key ways through his own vexed relationship with reading. He gets key ideas, for instance, when his teacher reads to him and his classmates about the West Indies. Unable to read, himself, he puts great stock in the book, later explaining to Grandfather Compson that ““when the time came when I realized that to accomplish my design I should need first of all and above all things money in considerable quantities and in the quite immediate future, I remembered what he had read to us and I went to the West Indies”” (Faulkner 196). He soon learns that words are once again key ingredients in the recipe of his design, in that “he would have to learn to speak a new language, else that design to which he had dedicated himself would die still-born” (200). As he then regrets not having “taken the schooling along with the West Indian lore” (200), we must wonder if the “mistake” he worries over later, when his design falters, is in part the mistake of not reading carefully enough.

And indeed, Sutpen’s later worry stems from his evident expectation that his own design would come together as easily and reliably as Sears advertised its kit homes would. Granted, when Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, he builds his house only with the utmost exertion and difficulty, taking “two years, he and his crew of imported slaves...work[ing] from sunup to

sundown” (Faulkner 28)¹⁴ as they carry the mansion’s components “plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp” until everything was “completed save for the windowglass and the ironware which they could not make by hand” (Faulkner 28). The text emphasizes their direct, hands-on connection to the materials and the laborious, extended, physical experience of fashioning those materials into not only a house but “the largest edifice in the county, not excepting the courthouse itself” (Faulkner 30).

To focus only on the duration and difficulty of Sutpen’s building, however, would be to overlook his motivating logic, which in fact more closely aligns Sutpen with the builder of a kit home than with the occupants of the plantations he is so determined to emulate. While Sutpen may, in a very unSearsmanlike way, put a great deal of his own effort, time, and loot into building his literal house, his plan for building his corresponding family line, the “House of Sutpen,” takes a leaf straight out of a Sears Modern Homes catalogue. “I had a design in my mind,” Sutpen eventually explains to Grandfather Compson. “I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife” (212). Faulkner emphasizes Sutpen’s formulaic approach, furthermore, in addressing the man’s confusion over how his design could have failed to produce its intended effect. When Sutpen must confront the return of Charles Bon, he is distressed, specifically, by how the event interferes with his design, complicating his “code of logic and morality, his formula and recipe of fact and deduction” (221), by which the House of Sutpen ought to prosper. Notably, this formula suggests that Sutpen’s perpetuation of racial violence is as incidental to his own feelings and beliefs as is his incidental wife. Participation in a slave economy is a necessary step in his journey to aristocratic status rather than primarily a symptom of his own perceptions of inherent racial worth. Faulkner ties this formulaic thinking, furthermore, to the “innocence” shattered by

the front door incident, the “innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out” (212). As well as reinforcing the instrumentality fueling Sutpen’s motivations, this baking metaphor reveals how fully Sutpen believes his own design—also one of domestic creation—to be as “positively guaranteed” as Sears declares its materials to be.¹⁵

Sutpen’s kit home mentality also extends well beyond his faith in formula and his realization of the significance of words in mediating the construction process. The intangible dimensions of the thing he is trying to build also call to mind the more intangible promises of the kit homes, such as the idea that they can integrate the builder into a history he might otherwise have no access to. Sutpen’s ultimate project comes into focus if we trace the significance of a particular historic-home-turned-kit-house-model that appears elsewhere in Faulkner’s work: the space of historic Mount Vernon. Once the actual home of George Washington, Mt. Vernon was one of the early “cultish restorations of the houses of iconic figures” that would pave the way for the museum house movement (Festa 74). By tracking this historical home into the realm of the ready-made mail-order house, we can see more clearly how kit homes distilled and disseminated the idea that material space could bring the national mythology right into the fiber of one’s own home, and in turn could integrate the home-owner into that mythology.

Sears built two reproductions of Mt. Vernon in 1931, one for the U.S. government for the Paris Exhibition and one for the Washington Bicentennial celebration in Brooklyn. Images of the Mt. Vernon reproduction and other similar projects would appear in the 1933 catalogue, both advertising the Modern Homes Department’s capabilities and imbuing its building projects with an air of patriotism (Stevenson and Jandl 25). Mt. Vernon was also an architectural muse for the

Sterling System-Built Homes, which presented The Vernon as the best they had to offer (Banta 258). Between its title and its further designation as the “Finest of the Fifty,” the house specifically connects such fulfillment to the unfurling of American history, in that the buyer, like Washington, gets to inhabit Mt. Vernon, and in doing so, attain something closer to the stature of Washington himself. It also locates the buyer in a national spatial scheme, invoking the union of the fifty states and making the buyer’s house one of them. By offering the chance to live in a re-iteration of Mt. Vernon, the Sterling and Sears models offer a place—in both senses—in American history: a replication of historical space and a kind of pedigree of estate to re-fashion the buyer as an American founding father.

And indeed, more generally, many of the kit homes offer a sense of connection to the past—whether highlighting civic and national or other sorts of valences. Regarding Sears’ later offerings, Banta discusses the dilemma of Depression-era house kit ad copy, which plays on buyers’ nostalgia by suggesting that purchasing the house connects them to, and even allows them to inhabit, a different and better time. The Bayside model of 1938, for example, “looks back to the preindustrial, precorporate days of sturdy fisherfolk,” while another model “turns its back on an endless procession of autos” and another “recall[s]... a century whose anxieties ceased with the winning of the nation’s glorious revolution” (qtd. Banta, 267). These later models invoke a time specifically free of modern technology and concerns, and yet promise a home that is the product, the epitome, of the modernized production process. Through these catalogues, one can purchase and easily assemble, in modern fashion, an anti-modern stance and the old-fashioned home that embodies that stance. What does Sutpen attempt, if not to successfully manage this exact tension? He aims to use the “positively guaranteed,” formulaic logic of modern building to build an anti-modern home, a space that suggests inheritance through

the ages and connects him to a personal and regional history he cannot truthfully claim.

“The Sutpen’s Hundred”

In Faulkner’s oeuvre, it is Flem Snopes rather than Thomas Sutpen who models his house on Mt. Vernon in order to aggrandize himself.¹⁶ Sutpen’s estate, though, works on much the same principle, as he uses it to arrogate a more nuanced status to himself and his family. By focusing more closely on one of the Sears models, we can see how it distills the thinking behind Sutpen’s attempts, through the construction and manipulation of domestic elements, both to insert himself into a personal, genealogical history and to insert himself into a national, cultural history. The different levels of his project and its kit home sympathies come into relief, for instance, when we consider one aspect of his design, the acquisition of Ellen Coldfield as his wife, alongside the 1928 Sears model, *The Puritan*.

Through Ellen, Sutpen seeks the “moral fumigation” (Faulkner 38) made possible by association with Mr. Coldfield’s “name for absolute and undeviating and even puritan uprightness in a country and time of lawless opportunity” (Faulkner 32). We soon learn that his connection to the House of Coldfield, as it were, his acquisition of “the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law” are not only essential to his design for the genealogical House of Sutpen but take part in blending that ideological house with a notion of its materiality, in that the narrative soon describes Sutpen’s wedding license as an essential piece of “furniture” for the house he has built but not yet decorated (Faulkner 39). We might view this as a version of Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption,” in which people as well as objects can become displays of wealth.¹⁷ Another way to look at it, though, is that although Mr. Coldfield could ostensibly offer Sutpen little besides “credit at a little cross-roads store,” what Sutpen gains from this connection

is, in a sense, what is advertised by another manifestation of rural consumerism: the mail-order catalogue.

As Thomas Schlereth discusses, this type of catalogue allowed rural American consumers to somewhat mysteriously but easily order and acquire the signs and features of a different lifestyle, either directly through mail-order catalogues or through the small storekeepers who sometimes mediated the mail-order process.¹⁸ In a sense, then, Sutpen is grasping not just at class status but at a more modern idea of consumerism, trying to connect through the little shopkeeper to a market system that does in fact offer the consumer a connection to the signs and features of a different lifestyle. Insofar as he succeeds, the text makes Sutpen out as a kind of model of the new consumer-citizen as the individual who can, in a sense, master the material world and express his own financial and social subjectivity through the products he chooses. The very same sort of model consumer-citizen, we might note, who would ideally be expressing his civic and social conformity by following the OYOH call to purchase a kit home at any given moment in the early 20th century.

At the same time, as a newcomer operating on this model, he seems in a broader sense to represent the transforming post-war household economy. As Grace Hale explains, the slave economy had sustained the plantation-style “Big House” as a functioning “economic unit,” but the “Civil War accelerated the destruction of these households by disrupting the rhythms of home production....For all classes of southerners, domestic spaces increasingly became places of consumption rather than production,” as further facilitated by the rising use of mail-order catalogues (89). Eventually getting pushed unhappily from plantation-building to shop-keeping himself,¹⁹ Sutpen symbolizes at once what some perceived as the potential and what others perceived as the degradation this shift represented for post-war southern society.

Wielding the more positive potential of consumer culture in the time leading up to the war—a potential that includes within it the changes supporting a rising post-bellum black middle class—Sutpen essentially buys in to the House of Coldfield. In doing so, he purchases identification with a lifestyle purer than his own, pitting a consumerist self-fashioning against a local economy based in inherited wealth and status, a social economy which, however hypocritically, claims to be antithetical to the notion of buying in. He attempts, here, to link himself through acquisition to a genealogy of puritanical American “stainlessness,” at once inserting himself into the ideological history of an American puritan tradition and, in a sense, building that history into his own design as if it were one of the optional features in the kit for the House of Sutpen, or as his estate will in fact be titled, “Sutpen’s Hundred.”

Would that he could have waited a few years and saved himself (and the Coldfields) a great deal of trouble. For in fact, a manifestation of that very cultural genealogy was one of the kit houses on offer in the late 20s and early 30s. The copy for The Puritan, a home in the Sears “Honor Bilt” line, encapsulates the tension between history and modernity, offering itself as “the most modern type of Dutch Colonial architecture,” that is, the most innovative re-iteration of a historical form. This architectural union of modernity and tradition, furthermore, offers a material version of the “stainlessness” and the society membership Sutpen looks for in the puritan line of the Coldfields: “Painted pure white with contrasting green shutters...it is an architectural masterpiece. Where will you find a more inviting entrance than this quaint Colonial doorway with Colonial hood, which can be ornamented by the Colonial benches on either side of the doorway?” (*Sears Archives*). By foregrounding “Colonial” architecture and ornament, the ad signals as well a promise of national (and potentially ethnic) membership, as the buyer passes through the “inviting entrance” into the Colonial space of the nation and its history.

Of course, to become a colony is also to enter into a space of subordination, and we are left to wonder whether the buyer is aligned with the 18th-century American colony on its way to revolution and self-ownership, or with an early 20th-century America developing its own imperial holdings. Sutpen, too, invokes this ambiguity as his efforts simultaneously grasp at the imagined purity of a colonial past and carry connotations of U.S. imperial activities unfolding in Faulkner's own time.²⁰ Either way, the home spaces of both Sutpen and the Sears Puritan veil the dynamics of imperial power in a nostalgic haze, coding the politics of international domination as quaint and inviting, the entrance into such a scheme as a portal to color-coded purity, comfort, and belonging. And indeed, in his quest to redeem the front door trauma of his boyhood, to build an "even bigger and whiter" house than the one he was once turned away from, Sutpen can think of no better entrance to Jefferson society than through the "pure white" doorway of his very own puritan family line. And the "pure white" puritan household framework only becomes more important as the text slowly reveals the complicated racial character of Sutpens' family line.

That being said, in terms of its dimensions and architectural style, Sutpen's house more closely resembles not The Puritan, but The Magnolia or The Jefferson, "southern colonial"-style house models which attach one's purchase of a personal living space to membership in larger cultural and historical continuums by associating the buyer with prestigious figures and homes in American history. The copy for The Jefferson declares: "Designed along the same lines as historic Mt. Vernon, this southern colonial home spells success" (*Sears Archives*). The Magnolia, meanwhile, the "grandest house Sears ever offered" (Stevenson and Jandl 25), refers to the founding figure Washington and his historical home as a jumping-off point for an even broader variety of cultural memberships—scientific, artistic, and specifically literary. The house, whose image graced the front of the 1918 catalogue, looks like a plantation house, with its columned

portico, elegant walk, grand dimensions, and pastoral surroundings, and further invokes southern splendor through the perfumed elegance of its very name. Here, too, we see the unity of the home's modernity—its “Already Cut and Fitted” materials and promise of “Honor Bilt” efficiency, speed, and accuracy—with promises of its historicity, its grounding in various aspects of cultural and architectural pedigree:

From the days of George Washington to the present time, the Colonial type of residence has always been popular. It has housed the greatest figures in American history, science, and literature. Many will recognize a close resemblance in the illustration above to the famous residence at Cambridge, Mass., where the poet Longfellow composed his immortal works. Leading architectural authorities declare that this type will continue to win favor for hundreds of years... (*Sears Archives*)

To occupy this domestic space is to align oneself with several kinds of posterity, suggesting power but also refinement. Furthermore, The Magnolia presents a space where nation-building—i.e., the ultimate expression of founding fatherhood—and narrative-building align, as it facilitates the work of both Washingtons and Longfellows. The Southern colonial home, in the house kit catalogues, is a portal to both personal grandeur and historical significance. It aligns home- and narrative-construction, positioning the builder as a multi-faceted originator. Furthermore, it aligns originary power with refinement, and thus, it reinforces the idea that this style of home grants its occupant membership in a cultured class, a class of people who can claim a pedigree and can also assure the future success of their estate.²¹

Sutpen constructs his own version of The Magnolia in order to both perform an identity based in a notion of hereditary class status and to secure that fabricated class status for his

progeny. Or put slightly differently, he aims to create and secure social status for himself through the invention of a past that would authorize his desired future. In this regard, his built environment of nostalgia emblemizes the process Grace Hale argues occurred after the Civil War and Reconstruction, through which white Southerners constructed the mythology of the racially harmonious happy plantation in order to justify a post-Reconstruction reassertion of the racial order in the form of Jim Crow society. As Hale puts it, “Reimagining the recent past, southern whites celebrated a plantation pastoral of racial harmony and a noble war of principle and valor, while making Reconstruction the fall that made segregation the only possible future” (48). This imagined continuity between modern domestic life and “the distant plantation pastorate of a simpler age” (65) depended upon the “conflation of new middle-class home and old plantation household that helped ground the white middle class’s new racial order.” This process depends, ultimately, on “the white home as both site and symbol...linking the southern past and present” (Hale 87), and thus highlighting the ways in which the material management of the home, in combination with its conceptualization, may structure the social order more broadly.

Sutpen’s project, too, clearly depends on the white home as a material and concept, as the manifestation of an invented past that serves as a locus of social (and specifically racial) identification between himself and Jefferson society. Silent as he is about his origins, he builds a home that emblemizes that imagined past and which he hopes will create social continuity between an imagined aristocratic past for himself and an imagined aristocratic future for his progeny. The house seems meant to reify his identification with the Jefferson community, materializing his intentions and fixing the hoped-for fate. We could see it as one of what Hale calls “spatial mediations of modernity—ways of attaching identities to physical moorings” people carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to the ways war and post-

war “economic changes”—such as trends toward “centralization, standardization, urbanization, and mechanization”—that “destabilized categories of power” (6). She notes further that many white southerners were particularly bent on performing such spatial mediations in ways that sustained white supremacy. That being the case, we can see how the white plantation house, in southern mythology and Sutpen’s mythology, works to consolidate societal reactions to both the rise of mass culture (along with its related technologies) and the social instability it fostered.

That is, the constructed plantation house operates in the text as a locus of social and technological change. The rest of this discussion will turn to the question of how the text negotiates between the spatial constructions of the self represented by the plantation mythology on the one hand and the mass-produced housing easy-assembly ideology on the other. What brings them together, ultimately, is that each depends on the underlying paradox of in/distinction represented by mass-production technology and its balance of specialized and standardized parts. Though with differing connotations of fear and hope, respectively, each explores the implications of the fact that it seems increasingly difficult to distinguish between the social elements that constitute the spatial environment. In particular, these different domestic constructions each respond to the fluidity of class and race positions, the plantation mythology working to contain that social instability while the kit home ideology depends upon and even profits by it.

Domestic In/distinction

Before considering further what it meant to mass-produce the space of American homes, it is worth noting that as such technology picked up steam, there was already anxiety associated with its transformation of society. Consider, for instance, Keaton’s compatriot Charlie Chaplin and the fate of The Tramp in *Modern Times*. The factory line takes its toll, pushing him further

and faster, interfering with his person, sucking him right into the machine, and finally spitting him out again, a fair bit worse for wear. Such images register cultural anxiety about technology speeding up and mechanizing not only society but individual people, threatening to draw them into its gears with who knows what consequence.²² The notion of integrating people and machines also applies in the other direction, with machines seeming poised to control or even invade bodies, as when the Tramp finds one feeding him his lunch, strong-arming his very digestion. Mass-production does indeed depend as much on specificity as on interchangeability, but the paradox lies in the sense that it is not always clear which is which, or what makes something one thing or the other, or when one's own specificity might be dissolved into the workings of progress. These sorts of concerns and confusions inform mass-production's growing involvement in the production of intimate, private, home spaces.

If we think of Sutpen's house being written into this cultural context, in which readers were familiar with the concept that even a grand house could be a mass- and factory-produced iteration of a model design, we can see the degree to which that house is also a mechanical phenomenon, Fordism brought home. More specifically, it is a mechanical phenomenon that represents the tension between the height of distinction—i.e., discrete and highly specific parts and functions—and the height of indistinguishability—i.e., interchangeable parts and standardized final products. The grandest house kits offer the distinction of class and quality. Though only one part of the rising modern economy of mail-order consumerism, mass-production, shipping, and national branding (Bronner 8),²³ these sorts of kit homes crystallize an interface between the homogeny of mass-production and the distinction of *self*-production through consumer choice. The Vernon, for instance, crowns its claims with the assurance: Never was there another such Home. Never will there be again this opportunity to own it" (Banta 258).

Sterling offers the buyer not only excellence but singularity, the distinction of owning a unique, fleetingly available treasure. But of course, it is nothing of the sort, being a model available to anyone who chooses to order it, through a system that promises multiple buyers essentially indistinguishable houses. Making the houses, in turn, depends at once on the distinction of discrete parts with intensely specific purposes and the indistinguishability of the interchangeable parts essential to mass-production.

This nexus of technological and social in/distinction is essential to understanding Sutpen's efforts, his failure, and the question of what Faulkner ultimately means to suggest by portraying these things. Though Sutpen performs for a 19th-century community, he imports some of the commodity culture connotations of his readers' time, including the sense that even the best of the best he can build or buy could easily be one of the standard models offered somewhere in the catalogue pages. Meanwhile, his attempt at the social distinction of status fails when he encounters the problem of another kind of social distinction, that of race identity, proving to be dangerously unstable. His commitment to the racial distinction of his House, ultimately, takes down the house that is the material emblem of his briefly-held class distinction. The futility of his project seems to represent, more broadly, the beginning of the end of Southern aristocratic distinction as such. In staging Sutpen's own attempt to manufacture class through domestic spatial performance, Faulkner ultimately dissolves aristocratic posturing (along with any more genuine gentility he might celebrate or mourn) into the encroaching tide of mass-manufacturing technology and the expanding middle class culture—including an expanding black middle class—that both fueled and was fueled by this jump in the scale of consumer culture.

The link between Sutpen's failed social manufacturing and the rise in technological manufacturing hits a note of elegy for the southern economy, which would not share in post-war

prosperity in the same way as northern urban centers,²⁴ and for the South of plantation mythology more generally. Still, Sutpen's dilemma is clearly something still more complicated than the discrepancy between northern and southern experiences of economic prosperity. It has to do with the question of discrepancy itself—the question of how consumer culture simultaneously seems to minimize discrepancy through standardization and mass-replication of products on the one hand, and how it gives people the means to acquire and display goods so as to express individuality and distinction, on the other. Sutpen struggles with precisely this sort of paradox, in that he seeks to distinguish himself in society, essentially, by making himself indistinguishable from others of the class and station to which he aspires.

Clearly, he aims above simply resembling his fellow Jeffersonian townspeople, in that he builds a house repeatedly noted as matching the courthouse in size, and, more importantly still, “bigger and whiter” than the original plantation house where he was turned away. The success of his grand design, though, for the brief time in which it holds steady, emerges in the suggestions that he has managed to successfully blend into the white upper class. Quentin later describes Henry's youthful experience, for instance, of “sojourns at other houses, plantations, almost interchangeable with his own, where he followed the same routine he did at home” and went to parties for “square dancing with identical and also interchangeable provincial virgins, to music exactly like that at home” (Faulkner 86), these experiences combining with his “puritan heritage—that heritage particularly Anglo-Saxon” (86) to set Henry up for the shockingly “foreign” New Orleans. At least in the public eye, Sutpen has successfully bequeathed to his son the experience of a (distinctively, “particularly”) white southern gentry raising, authentic enough that its spaces and social practices can be near impossible to distinguish from those of more fully established families and plantations.

His success is confirmed, in a sense, by Wash Jones, a poor white man who lives on Sutpen's plantation and whose granddaughter Sutpen will ultimately impregnate in hopes of producing a (distinctly) white heir. This fact in itself is quite telling, as it signals what Grace Hale identifies as the white southern commitment, in the post-Reconstruction years when African Americans were increasingly moving in to the middle class, to making the difference between races rather than the difference between classes the most meaningful social distinction. "Racial essentialism," she argues, "grew in popularity among whites in tandem with the rise of the new black middle class and its increasing visibility" (21). By the time Faulkner was writing *Absalom, Absalom!*, in "the 1930s, having fashioned a common whiteness out of the racial absolutes of the color line, southern whites with aristocratic pretensions and middle-class presents"—a description that might characterize much of Sutpen's Jefferson society, especially after the war—"formed black figures as the conduits of white difference, translating class into race" (Hale 74). Both preserving white supremacy and slowing the growth of mixed-race and mixed-gender class solidarity required "making and perpetuating the myth of absolute racial difference in this region" (21), and this conceptual division required the spatial divisions of segregation to reify it. Sutpen's final attempt to make the formulaic design of his House of Sutpen work—though carried out in the just barely post-bellum years—reflects this increasing pressure on the standardization of racial categories as though they too could be mechanized, simplified, and refined in order to facilitate the mass-production of group identity. As though they too could be streamlined into pre-cut and –measured mass-produced elements for easy assembly of the ideal household, or community, or neighborhood, or region, or nation.

Still, there are distinctions within distinctions, and Sutpen clearly works to attain class distinction within his perceived (indeed constructed) racial category. He ultimately manages to

make himself interchangeable, to some extent, with the rest of the southern gentry crowd. Though Sutpen's impoverished origins much more nearly resemble Wash's, Wash categorizes Sutpen as belonging to that upper class of southern gentry rather than his own. After killing Sutpen for his involvement with Wash's granddaughter, Wash senses "them gathering with the horses and dogs and guns—the curious and the vengeful—men of Sutpen's own kind, who used to eat at his table with him back when he (Wash) had yet to approach nearer the house than the scuppernog arbor" (Faulkner 232). The reader may recognize a greater resonance between Wash's exclusion from the house and Sutpen's own boyhood experience on the domestic fringes, but Sutpen has aligned himself with Jefferson's upper class well enough for Wash to identify them rather than himself as Sutpen's "own kind." This is exactly the sort of interchangeability Sutpen aimed for in designing his future self, planning to re-produce himself on the model of the ruling class rather than the poor white underclass into which he was born. He has aimed to make himself another in the line of Vernons or Magnolias, rather than one of the Simplex Sectionals that more closely resemble the cabins of Sutpen's past and Wash Jones' present.

Or rather, to *re-make* himself. For Sutpen's project is importantly revealed to be a project not just of domestic creation, but of domestic *replication*, a notion which filters aspirational social reproduction through mass-production technology of consumer culture. Replications of space and self come together in Sutpen's building projects in at least two vital ways. For one, he aims to remake his identity, in part, by replicating and improving upon earlier models of domestic spaces that have framed his experience. Secondly, he aims, within the final iteration of his domestic framework, to re-produce himself in the form of an heir and family line, which in turn are ideologically framed by the notion of the "House of Sutpen." His efforts, then, depend both on the possibility of replication and the successful departure from the original model.

Faulkner alerts us to the significance of such attempts to replicate domestic space by grounding Sutpen—when we do finally hear the story of his origins—in a domestic setting described as a repetition of a still earlier one.

To begin with, Sutpen's origins are subjected to a great deal of narrative replication as the story filters down from Grandfather to Father to the most direct narrator, Quentin Compson. Quentin reports that before his traumatic front door encounter, Sutpen and his family had moved down from the mountains into the tidewater area and were now "living in a cabin that was almost a replica of the mountain one except that it didn't sit up in the bright wind but sat instead beside a big flat river that sometimes showed no current at all and even sometimes ran backward..." (184). Their current house is a near copy of the previous. The move down the mountain, from bright wind to flat, backwards river highlights descent and a sense of diminishment, but the description of it as a "near replica" still suggests that the new domestic framework itself is hard to discern from the first, and it notably uses the language of commodity reproduction to do it, calling to mind for instance tourist sites selling replicas of historic home furnishings. It is perhaps in this transformation that Sutpen fundamentally learns both the fact that copying can be done and the stakes of contextual positioning; he must find a way to raise rather than lower the value of his domestic property through that process of replication. Indeed, he seems to work on just that issue as he moves from cabin to plantation settings and eventually attempts to build his own plantation house, which is meant to both copy and best the bigness and whiteness of the house that rejected him, and even that of the West Indian house that framed his first attempt at his grand design.²⁵

Furthermore, the notion of domestic replication is tied, here, to a conflation of confused origins and confused identity. For, just before describing the new instantiation of the cabin,

Faulkner notes that we have just passed the moment when Sutpen himself has lost track of his own origins, a loss of bearings that also comes to us in terms of the spatial anchoring and the location of the originary domestic structure:

For a time, during the first days or weeks or months, the woodsman's instinct which he had acquired from the environment where he grew up ...kept him oriented so that he could have (so he said) found his way back to the mountain cabin in time. But that was past now, the moment when he last could have said exactly where he had been born now weeks and months (maybe a year, the year, since that was when he became confused about his age and was never able to straighten it out again...) behind him. So he knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why (184).

The family's new house is almost but not quite the same, and the move into this near replica frames Sutpen's own move into almost but not quite knowing how old he is, or where he's come from, or why things are going as they are, an array of uncertainties which briefly but importantly align his voice with that of ex-slave narrators who do not know their own birthdates, among other important details about themselves.²⁶ We see here the possibility of domestic replication increasing the inhabitant's confusion about his own origins and identity, possibly destabilizing his racial identity, and above all linking reproduction of domestic space to destabilization of social positioning. This confusion unsettles young Sutpen even as it hints at the larger possibility of liberation from a hierarchical social scheme in which one's status is inexorably linked to one's origins, whether or not those origins are also legible in the color of one's skin.

And indeed, shortly after the meditation on domestic replication, Sutpen's narrative delves into the racial dimensions of the associated confusion. Following the description of his

own family's house, Sutpen encounters the leisuring plantation owner, a sight which in turn brings on the description of how the Sutpen family's material domestic setting compares to that of the black slaves working on the plantation. Quentin relates that Sutpen's family and "other whites like them...lived in other cabins not quite as well built and not at all as well kept and preserved as the ones the nigger slaves lived in" (185). Though he is explaining the difference between these cabins, the Sutpens have more in common with the nearby black families in regards to domestic design than they do with the plantation owner. Furthermore, the quality and keeping of the slaves' houses not only compares to but supersedes that of the whites'. The material manifestations of the racial hierarchy here complicate rather than simply confirm it, signaling the very sort of indistinct social and racial boundaries white supremacist culture sought to standardize in Faulkner's time, through the "spatial mediations" (Hale 6) of segregation and the imagined, "racially innocent plantation pastorate" (Hale 54) retroactively imposed on Sutpen's time.

The possibility of confused domestic positioning is quickly contained here, as the narrator notes that the whites' cabins were, however, "still imbued with freedom's bright aura, which the slave quarters were not for all their sound roofs and white wash" (185). Material soundness, upkeep, and other sorts of felicity are not enough to actually reverse the power dynamics that the homes' inhabitants are subject to while slavery is intact. The white houses—whether cabins or mansions—still register the domestic felicity of freedom in a way the "white wash" on the slave cabins cannot. However, we see here, as elsewhere, the possibility that domestic space can register or even create important confusions or reversals. The slaves from these cabins would have no more luck entering the front door of the plantation house than young Sutpen does. A slave, however, can turn him away from it, and that inversion of the social order

is enough to shake Sutpen into losing the “innocence” which “he had [previously] not yet discovered he possessed” (185). We see here the tension between the constant assertion of racial hierarchy and the possibility—framed through representations of domestic structures and considerations of their similarity—that the hierarchy can be complicated and even reversed, perhaps as the river flowing beside the most recent replica of the Sutpen cabin “sometimes showed no current at all and even sometimes ran backward.”

That very tension would be heightened in a new way during Faulkner’s time, when lived domesticity might more accurately manifest social parity between blacks and whites as classed subjects. Indeed, when many African Americans might have homes nicer than those of many poor whites, and freedom’s bright aura besides, thus triggering incidents of white reprisal against visible black domestic comfort and status as discussed by Mooney and Wagner.²⁷ What made these changes possible, in many ways, was the broader economic shift that turned southern homes from places of production to places of consumption. This move towards standardization, mechanization, and nationalization of consumer culture helped re-shuffle the social order in turn-of-the-century and early-20th-century America. The tandem rise of the black middle class and a mass-production-fueled consumer economy creates the cultural context for a narrative meditation on the possible relationship between mass-production, racial identities, categories of power, and the intimate material spaces manifesting commodity culture and shaping race relations.

With these dynamics informing Sutpen’s early encounters with domestic replication as a source of racial confusion, it is important to consider the ways in which the text racializes mass-production itself. Sutpen’s early experience of possible racial confusion is linked to the vagueness of his own origins, and hereditary anonymity continues throughout the text to signal racial complication. Regarding rising rural consumerism—or a lack thereof in the post-bellum

South—it is worth noting that mail-order consumption, specifically, was often racialized by southern store keepers who felt threatened by the rise of this competing market form. Many southern whites considered mass-produced items to represent “the loss of a way of life” (Hale 90). Thomas Schlereth addresses these dynamics in his study of the ways in which country stores, county fairs, and mail-order catalogues became “agencies of change where rural Americans made direct contact with the mass production and mass distribution of industrial, commercial America” (375). He notes that the mail-order delivery system threatened and enraged many small storekeepers and that “midwestern and southern storekeepers appealed to provincialism and xenophobia among their customers...peddl[ing] rumors to their predominantly white, Protestant clientele that Sears and Ward were black men” (372). The mysterious, distant origins of products elide in people’s minds with the mysterious origins of those who purvey them, and into the mysteries of both market and biological production, they project racial fear.²⁸

Sutpen’s own mysterious origins also produce mistrust, and Faulkner does indeed reinforce the idea that Sutpen and Bon, the figures produced “nobody knows where,” are indeed more racially uncertain figures. The townspeople in *Absalom, Absalom!* do not channel that uncertainty into making *Sutpen* another Joe Christmas, but his narrators do parse it through the racial complication of Sutpen’s family line and the growing, if fabricated, certainty that Charles Bon must be black—indeed, through the process of narrative production and re-production that gradually distills, or rather *builds*, details into this final, problematic conclusion. Not surprisingly, it is through Bon’s branch of Sutpen’s line that we see the text’s most explicit racialization of mass-production,²⁹ when Clytie goes to New Orleans to retrieve Bon’s son, Charles Etienne.

We hear that she has made him wear an overall jumper coat, “that harsh and shapeless

denim cut to an iron pattern and sold by the millions—that burlesque uniform and regalia of the tragic burlesque sons of Ham” (Faulkner 160).³⁰ The focus on this mass-produced uniform of race continues as Charles Etienne grows and is described as the boy “with the overall jumper over what remained of his silk and broadcloth, who had become the youth in the uniform—the tattered hat and the overalls—of his ancient curse” (Faulkner 166). The gradual decline of Charles Etienne, the Sutpen product brought in from afar, unfolds through the boy’s interpolation into a production process that seems to conflate his racial construction with the impersonal, harsh patterning of mechanical production. When Charles Etienne lashes out against his social position, he does so in part by acquiring a wife who is at once a caricature of blackness and an extreme of mechanization, who “existed in [an] aghast and automaton-like state.” When she and Charles Etienne return from their year of dangerous living, she “did not, possibly could not, recount” the story of it but instead “exude[s]” and “excret[es]” it, thus showing her lack of control over narrative and thus her likely exclusion, in the novel’s terms, from history (166). Mass-production, in these cases, associates blackness with anonymity, inexpressiveness, the lack of distinction.

Quentin and Shreve’s climactic final telling of the conflict between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon also negotiates this problem of race and in/distinction. As they narrate its final stages, Henry comes back from his conversation with Sutpen through the dark in which he can “barely distinguish the men sleeping on the earth about them” (283) but soon finds that there is enough light in the camp for him to “distinguish Bon’s sleeping face” (284). Shortly thereafter, however, once Quentin and Shreve imagine Bon confirming his black heritage, Bon becomes “the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister,” and “the black son of a bitch” (286), losing the distinction of his name and family position to become one in a category of the dismissed and

despised. The narrators' move towards misogynistic language this moment also heightens the sense that they are dismissing Bon to what various scholars have identified as a feminized, denigrated realm of mass-production.³¹ Reinforcing the construction of mass-culture as feminine, they also use the relegation of "black" Bon to social indistinction to simultaneously feminize blackness and racialize masculinity. Above all, relegate him to anonymity they do. Moments before, Henry could distinguish Bon in a sea of uniformed soldiers, but once Bon dons the "uniform" of race, his particularity is lost. He is re-cut according to the iron pattern, not to be sold to the millions, per se, but now, in a sense, one of the millions to be sold.

The Human Element: Race in the Machine

Insofar as the positive and negative potentials of mass-production infuse the text and its construction of domestic experience, it is important to note the ways in which the text highlights as well the fallibility of mechanical processes, or rather, the things that threaten the Fordist faith, cheery or otherwise, that such processes might invoke. This concern brings us back to the text's vaudeville echoes, the more light-hearted specter of Buster Keaton's easy-assemble house kit and the ease with which modernity dis-assembles it. Both *One Week* and *Absalom, Absalom!* show that the framework dependent upon mechanical accuracy and formulaic patterning is still subject, ultimately, to human error or interference. Discussing the Snopes trilogy, Banta argues that "Faulkner produces a series of narratives constructed around the waste and need introduced by the uncontrollable 'human element,' which no principle of scientific management can completely rationalize or control" (8). This uncontrollable human element is at the heart of Keaton's house-building troubles, in that unbeknownst to him, his new wife's previous suitor has renumbered the crates of house materials in order to sabotage the building process. It also has

something to do with the “mistake” Sutpen searches for in his recipe and formula that has failed to produce the expected results.

Sutpen traces the “mistake” back to being deceived by his first wife and her father, who “concealed from [Sutpen] the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which [he] had been working toward” (220). His confusion over the hitch in his plan emerges, furthermore, while he is busy chasing his escaped architect, the very embodiment of domestic design. Design itself has gotten away from him, and though Sutpen’s crew does catch the architect, the designer’s flight presages still greater ways in which Sutpen’s design will elude him. His struggle against this elusiveness only further stresses his evident belief that, fundamentally, his House of Sutpen design ought to be as “positively guaranteed” as a kit home. In this case, Sutpen himself is the industrial formula. He is the machine who never stops through “fifty years of effort and striving to establish a posterity” (221). And the destructive “factor” to which Sutpen refers is the child Bon’s partial black heritage. In a broader sense, the “uncontrollable ‘human element’” that confounds the machine of modernized socio-spatial domestic reproduction turns out to be uncontrollable, unpredictable, unreliably distinct blackness.

Above all, it is the impossibility of actually perceiving that element of blackness that makes it so detrimental to the machine in question. In a system that balances distinction and the indistinguishable, a part believed to be specialized has turned out to be indistinguishable as such (or perhaps vice versa). Distinction itself has become indistinct, impossible to discern. Race has turned out not to be essential and legible but indistinct and constructed, if nonetheless weighty once reified. And thus, the nature of the whole enterprise has been thrown into question. Sutpen himself doesn’t realize the child’s racial heritage until after he is born (220), and the difficulty of

anyone else perceiving it motivates much of the narrative mystery. While Keaton's human element conducts straightforward sabotage by mislabeling the boxes, Sutpen's human element is still wilier, revealing the degree to which the parts may, on the one hand, have an inexorable specificity and on the other, have no inherent specificity at all, instead becoming whatever they are labeled.

The Mechanical Unhomely

That is, the question of whether Sutpen's descendants Bon and Henry are ultimately cut from the same racial pattern shows how the text brings concerns about the logic of mass-production and modern construction into conversation with still broader questions about sameness and otherness, the familiar and the unfamiliar. Critics often parse such questions through Freud's notion of the uncanny or *Unheimlich*. As Martin Kreisworth describes it,

The *Unheimlich*...is that which moves us away from our ground of being, from what is firm and decidable, from our home. It is not merely doubt about ontological basics.... It concerns, rather, the essential undecidability of the distinction between the two possibilities themselves." (127)

Kreisworth discusses race in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* as the factor complicating the binaries into which people try to parse possibilities. He describes this dilemma as the "racial uncanny," arguing that the problem the Sutpens and their narrators must confront is that "racial distinction is fundamentally baseless and nonexistent," and thus, that it is "the impossibility of race itself that is the insuperable horror that Bon...display[s]" (Kreisworth 139).

While this interpretive ground is well-trodden, I wish to extend such analysis by shifting focus from the uncanny to the *Unheimlich*, in that the latter term highlights the ways in which the

uncanny is understood as a matter of *domestic* uncertainty and confusion. In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler offers a particularly useful exploration of the material side of this notion, arguing that

if the theoretical elaboration of the uncanny helps us to interpret the conditions of modern estrangement, the special characteristics of architecture and urbanism as arts of spatial definition allow us to advance the argument into the domain of the tangible. Here it is that the ‘void’ described by *posthistoire* philosophy is almost uncannily repeated in the world, that the question of the ‘unhomely home’ finds its most poignant expressions and equally troubling solutions. (Vidler 13)

Along these lines, Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* in a world in which the clash of two important phenomena tangibly expressed Faulkner’s own conditions of modern estrangement. That is, (1) the Sears-style kit home and its related logic of quick and easy home- and self-construction was collapsing as (2) the Great Depression undermined any such easy formulas.

In Martha Banta’s terms, under these conditions the nation turned from the desire for the most expansive domestic constructions available to the desire for the safest, from the home that enhanced self-making to one that facilitated self-protection. For example, Banta discusses one late Sears house model promising that “From the kitchen an eye can be kept on both approaches [to the house]” and another similarly assuring anxious buyers that The Hampshire model “‘sets its entrance to the side where those within can see all those who approach’—people like the tramps, who were knocking upon the side doors of America asking for work and some food” (Banta 267). The great house in *Absalom, Absalom!*, too, registers this shift, from Sutpen building the biggest, whitest house he can in order to proclaim his validity to the world, to his daughter Clytie overseeing its final destruction, “appear[ing] in the window from which she must

have been watching the gates constantly day and night” (Faulkner 300) for signs of impending invasion, and finally burning the house down when the invasion in fact begins.

In the space between the house’s beginning and end, Sutpen’s anti-modern mode of house-building collapses into his modern mode of House-building to show that the logic of modern house-building—the ambiguous promise of kit home subjectivity and the paradox of in/distinguishability upon which it depends—is an essential element of this text’s encounter with the *Unheimlich*. The “unhomely home,” in this case, is the home built upon the material and ideological confusions that result from making a whole out of parts which represent both the extremes of anonymous interchangeability, on the one hand, and originality and specificity on the other—whether these parts are numbered beams or family members, and whether they are assembled according to mail-ordered blueprints or a grand design loosely based on a misread textbook, imagined by a baffled child. While I do not dispute critical focus on either the text’s concern with questions of racial distinction or the text’s various embodiments of the uncanny, I contend that the text’s *racial* uncanny is imbricated with its *mechanical* or *industrial* uncanny, its awareness of the ways in which a modern culture of standardization and mass-production reshapes notions of human identity and purpose, at once honing and undermining the social specificity of individuals. In the course of its destruction, the Sutpen “h”ouse’s gothic valence is amplified by the revelation that there is indeed the dark, almost supernatural presence of Henry’s decaying body hidden within it. But the confusion of racial elements confounding the House’s design seems at least as integral to its fate and comes to seem integral to the construction of the socio-spatial domestic more generally. What’s hidden in the house, ultimately, is modernized, mechanized house-ness itself.

We are left, then, to wonder where the text comes down on the question of whether the

paradox of in/distinction ultimately damages or liberates. This question, ultimately, directs us back to that of how spatial and narrative construction inform each other in the text. The larger—and I would argue ultimately redemptive—significance the text’s struggle with questions of socio-spatial in/distinction emerges in an early passage about the town of Jefferson turning against Sutpen. Narrating the event, Mr. Compson posits,

Perhaps this was because of what he brought back with him this time: the material he brought back this time, as compared to the simple wagon load of wild niggers which he had brought back before. But I don't think so. That is, I think it was a little more involved than the sheer value of his chandeliers and mahogany and rugs. I think that the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it. (33)

Initially, the passage signals an older model of the confusion of people and things. The townspeople react to the strange “material he brought back this time.” “Material” in the form of the “simple wagon load of wild niggers” presents no challenge to them; slaves as material objects fit easily into their ideology. What unsettles them, however, is the way in which Sutpen materially constitutes his household. And more importantly, the way in which his assembly of domestic material parts somehow “involve[s]” the town “with himself.” He brings material domestic elements from elsewhere, reminding us that he, too, is the product of a mysterious “elsewhere” as far as the townspeople are concerned. In the process, he counters that sense of distance and anonymity by further “involv[ing]” them with himself, and thus, drawing them into whatever mechanical process he has initiated, threatening to number them among its interchangeable parts.

The racial element continues here, but in a different form. More than once Sutpen has made himself, on some level, interchangeable with his slaves. As discussed, he visually blends with them while building his house, and while his house is “building,” his half-naked fights with them presumably lead to the physical touch the novel freights so heavily. In both cases, in connection to the building of his house, he dissolves the boundaries between “caste or color,” a notion the text insists on not only when Clytie touches Rosa’s arm but also when Wash menacingly declares “‘I’m going to tech you, Kernel’” (231). That is, Sutpen crosses lines of both caste and color, and by involving the townspeople with himself, he pulls them over these lines as well. The assembly of material domestic elements, in this moment, triggers the possibility of confusions and reversals of caste and color hierarchies, not just for Sutpen but for everyone. Through both material and conceptual strategies of home-building, Sutpen poses a threat of interchangeable *social* parts, suggesting that this modern logic of easy assembly, taken to its extreme, leads to the interchangeability of people and things, and perhaps more frightening still to Sutpen’s peers, the interchangeability of people and other *people* whom they have been accustomed to think of as things. Modernity, in this schema, poses a double threat to white southerners, demolishing an older way of life and leaving them to rebuild their notion of home out of crates that may now be, in their view, wildly mislabeled and disordered.

Granted, Faulkner’s meditation on these issues is more elaborate than Keaton’s jab at Fordist faith, and its sense of warning—delivered from the other side of the Depression—is more dire, pointing towards the ultimate impossibility of finding any set of crates to build with that *haven’t* been sabotaged by some villainous force or other. Certainly, the degree to which for many there is a sense of social (not to mention racial) re-ordering *as* villainous comes through in the criticism that hovers over Sutpen’s efforts. We see it, for instance, in Shreve’s brief but bitter

mockery of Sutpen's excessive home furnishings as upstart class pretensions.³² Rosa Coldfield articulates a more extended critique of Sutpen's status as a shield for his unworthiness, complaining that Sutpen has

fled here and hid, concealed himself behind respectability, behind that hundred miles of land which he took from a tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how, and a house the size of a courthouse where he lived for three years without a window or door or bedstead in it and still called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a King's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather—a home, position: a wife and family which, being necessary to concealment, he accepted along with the rest of respectability. (Faulkner 10)

Rosa is outraged at Sutpen's performance, through the name of his home, of a genealogical and class position she believes he is not entitled to. Sutpen's recipe, as it were, does not quite make a cake in her oven, either, with or without the return of Charles Bon. Her critique expresses her belief in Sutpen's villainy and exposes the degree to which her sense of his villainy aligns with her sense of his racialized anonymity as an obstacle to any possibility of *true* respectability. She also crystallizes here, though, the very argument Faulkner invokes through Sutpen's efforts: the tension between older aristocratic ideas of inherited social status and newer democratic ideals of self-making, along with their related connotations of a changing racial order.

Certainly, Jefferson society overall is troubled by Sutpen's socio-spatial maneuverings, and the text's manifest content is as dismal as the final, fiery collapse of the House of Sutpen. A consideration of how Sutpen's house is built in relation to how the text is built, however, reveals the aesthetic energy of the text to point in a different direction than its themes of collapse and mourning; its latent content lies instead in its dual destabilization of material and narrative

constructions. This union reveals a different sort of foundation for reading in which the built form itself highlights the liberating instability of both the social and material constructs at the heart of the narrative. It is not Sutpen, per se, but Faulkner who gestures towards the democratic potential Sutpen's project expresses, even as it strikes Jefferson society (and potentially many readers) as crass and ineffective bourgeois display. As T.J. Jackson Lears observes, Faulkner "understood the power of appearances, of surface display as a source of social...significance" (144).³³ There may be no guarantee that the house can fully make the man, but for a time, at least, it helps to make Sutpen, and to register not only his membership in Jefferson society but his membership in a tradition of founding figures, originators of one sort or another. Indeed, the house works just fine; it is rather the maniacal attachment to racial distinction that foils Sutpen's project. Meanwhile, by showing the power of Sutpen's material maneuverings to influence social relations, Faulkner gestures towards the possibility of a materialist approach in which economic change may break up the stranglehold of social custom.

That materialist approach, as I have suggested, draws attention to the modern technologies of home-building and the ways in which domestic mass-production helped to locate both social progress and racial panic in the construction of the living spaces that frame social relations. That scheme of domestic mass-production also frames the text's critique of the limitations of formulaic thinking when it comes to the mechanization and standardization of complex social relations. Throughout all of this, Faulkner attaches a sense of unease, discomfort, and even doom, to the paradox of in/distinction coded into mechanization and standardization. Still, the text does not ultimately suggest that mechanization cannot be applied profitably to the material space of the home. If anything, it hints as much at the positive potential of democratizing built space as at the folly of streamlining the construction process or broadening

access to it. Rather, the text ultimately shows the act of building to be an act of interpretation and narration, and it is the messy truth of lived experience that the formula of received narrative cannot contain. Or perhaps even more to the point, the text suggests that narrative itself—the reification of meaning—is the thing that cannot be profitably streamlined or standardized. The remainder of this discussion will pursue this notion by turning to the ways in which Sutpen’s material building process works, ultimately, to draw attention to Faulkner’s narrative-building.

While His Text Was Building

Again, Sears kit homes offer a way to see how the language of domestic construction parses the tension between material display as posturing and material performance as a conduit of social change. Let us consider once more Sutpen’s formulaic kit home mentality and the paradox that lies at the heart of it, the strange juxtaposition of its modern and anti-modern connotations. This paradox is epitomized by the naming of the “Honor Bilt” homes, the finest of the lines Sears offered. While the lesser “Standard Built” homes use the standard spelling, the “Honor *Bilt*” homes streamline the word “Built” itself. This spelling may mean to suggest novelty and speed, what Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* might call the “pep” of modernity. Or, it may manifest an interest in “scientific efficiency” at the level of linguistic branding.³⁴ At the other end of the spectrum, it might reference the “bilt” of the Vanderbilt family’s estate, “Biltmore,” which was modeled on French chateaux.³⁵ This grand house invokes the epitome of Old World status as filtered through Gilded Age America, the relative obscurity of the van der Bilts’ origins superseded by their rapid achievement of dynastic wealth in the U.S. in the 19th century. Pulling together the “less” of streamlined building and the “more” of Biltmore, the word at once highlights the distance between ends of the class spectrum and tantalizing offers of higher status

through economy and short-cutting.

Whatever the spelling is meant to suggest, the effect is disconcerting. The nobility and timelessness coded into the word “honor”—and potentially into the word “bilt” as well—collide with the short-cutting, tradition-flouting elision of the letters of “built,” suggesting perhaps not actual honor but the best approximation of it available for your money if you live near a railway line. On the one hand, it invokes the appeal of modern technological progress and the esteem accorded to those who can partake in it. On the other, it embodies what would be, from a classist point of view, the worst of petty bourgeois display. The genius of the brand, perhaps, is that it suggests that this contradiction is inherent to even the apotheosis of American domestic spatial display, the Vanderbilts themselves being the *nouveaux riches* in comparison to those whose chateaux their estate mimics.

There is a further way, though, to think of “Honor Bilt” and its inherent contradictions, which I would argue crystallizes Faulkner’s own approach to home-building in *Absalom, Absalom!*. That is the notion that eliding the letters of “Built” into “Bilt” defamiliarizes the building process itself. In modernist fashion, it unsettles the reader/buyer, suggesting that building has become something new, or perhaps never before was what it seemed to be. The benefits in Sears’ case are the rewards of clever and distinctive marketing. If we consider the defamiliarized work of building in *Absalom, Absalom!*, on the other hand, we can see how it unseats spatial reifications of an unjust social order. We can see how it points us back to the *other* kind of kit home, the Wright-style kit house, which joins the democratizing potential of mass-produced domestic space to an aesthetics of honesty that highlights rather than obscures the construction process. In Wright’s American System Built Homes, as in Faulkner’s systematically destabilized narrative of American socio-spatial home building, it is form itself that offers the

most reliable statement of value.

And indeed, Faulkner's narrative form, which constructs the text that constructs Sutpen's Hundred, builds its story out of the potentially unreliable tales of multiple narrators, ultimately telling us more about them as narrators than it tells us about Thomas Sutpen's motives or fate. The difficulty of keeping straight the narrators' positions in space and time, in relation to each other, and in relation to the "truth" of what has happened, immediately signals the instability of compilation. Indeed, as scholars such as Noel Polk have argued, it signals the instability of history itself, and of any "truth" that is ultimately based on interpretation or narration. The retroactively constructed narrative, for instance, of a peaceful plantation past and necessary Jim Crow future. Faulkner exposes his own construction process more intricately throughout the text as well, though, mapping a more conceptual questioning of socio-spatial assembly onto the persistent defamiliarization of the language of "building" throughout the text. From the first reports of Sutpen and his strange behavior, the text unsettles the narration of his building, specifically, in a way that raises questions about the larger social and political implications of his house (and "House") construction. To begin with, the opacity of his building project is linked to his own opaque origins, in that he "*came out of nowhere...with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently*" (Faulkner 5). The slippage between Quentin's "built" and Rosa's "tore," furthermore, quickly establishes that construction contains within it an inverse notion of destruction and disjuncture.³⁶

Faulkner demonstrates here, as well, that this slippage in meanings and kinds of building is largely a matter of perspective. What one narrator calls tearing, another reports as building and then corrects back to tearing, thus layering (or building) one perspective into the other. The fractured notion of building also mediates the conversation between parts of a fractured self, as it

is not just Quentin narrating but “the two separate Quentins now,” one incorporated into Southern ghostliness and the other not quite yet (Faulkner 4). “Building” is essential to Sutpen’s notion of selfhood, furthermore, as he suggests when he tells Grandfather Compson, “Perhaps a man builds for his future in more ways than one, builds not only toward the body which will be his tomorrow or next year, but toward actions and the subsequent irrevocable courses of resultant action which his weak senses and intellect cannot foresee” (196). Though the self-building metaphor is not unique in itself, it is important that insofar as the text troubles the meaning of building, it troubles in turn the construction of the present and future self, and also the body’s actions and unpredictable effects.

The textual unsettling of building, furthermore, manifests in the word’s form itself. When Judith witnesses Sutpen fighting with his slaves, we find that Sutpen “had builded even better in evil than even he could have hoped” (Faulkner 21). In relation to these fights, Faulkner complicates the word’s present tense construction as well as its past, stating that Grandfather Compson sees Sutpen fighting “by the light of the camp fire while his house was building” (203). Either the house is building itself, or the building process has somehow become organically or mechanically self-sustaining.³⁷ This removal of the human agent from the process echoes, in a sense, an earlier suggestion that “vanity,” an abstracted quality rather than a person, “conceived that house and...built it” (Faulkner 39). Even outside the narrative proper, building resists its conventional form. In the Chronology, whether by typo or intention, Faulkner indicates that in the year 1833, “Sutpen appears in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, takes up land, *build* his house” (305, emphasis mine), suggesting that there is some mismatch between the stated subject and the action. Perhaps more importantly, if we think of Sutpen as being reproduced and varied throughout the text’s multiple tellings of his story, it would make more

sense in any case to say that the Sutpens appear, take up land, and “build” his house, as stated.

Notably, the elisions and complications of the builder’s agency or subjectivity do not simply indicate Sutpen or Faulkner’s obfuscation of slave labor. Rather, the house is busy “building” while Sutpen *mixes* with his slaves through the fights he stages, which involve direct physical touch which aligns him with them further. As Rosa Coldfield articulates, “*let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too,*” that eggshell not incidentally calling up the many mentions of the house itself as a “shell” and thus as an essential framework for that shibboleth (112). And of course, the text’s focus on the opposite rendering, which highlights human labor in building the house, also aligns the white Sutpen with his black slaves in that they all look alike while covered with mud to protect themselves against the mosquitoes that attack them while they work (Faulkner 28). The ways in which agency and building fail to line up, then, do not simply signal a failure to see or represent black labor.³⁸ They do, however, suggest that Sutpen’s building process is integral to the text’s constructions and deconstructions of racial difference.

What are we to make, then, of the ways in which Faulkner unsettles the notion of building as well as its material manifestation on the page? I would argue that it points, ultimately, to an escape from an idea of overly rigid structure—material as well as social—that has undergirded the text’s tragedy, critiquing not Sutpen so much as the idea he embodies of taking formula and standardization too far. It grounds a critique of attempts to apply the streamlined mechanical formulas of mass-production to things they can’t and shouldn’t contain. That is, it directs us to question the mechanization and standardization of meaning and subjectivity, particular when such attempts at simplification of social experience rely on largely fabricated ideas of identity—racial or otherwise—as something fixed, distinct, and legible when

in fact actual experience reveals identity to be much more complicated, fluid, and ever under construction. In particular, Faulkner's destabilization of material and conceptual construction cautions against applying the standardizing logic of mass-produced domestic spaces to *narratives* of domestic construction—whether of plantation house or region or a nation thought of as home. Whether of Sutpen's attempt to reify an imagined past and future through the construction of his material plantation or the South's broader attempt to do much the same through the construction of a plantation mythology. Above all, by narratively defamiliarizing material construction in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner disrupts the spatial arrangements as well as temporal sequences that shape the social order.

For here, ultimately, lies the redemptive energy of the text's engagement with the promises of modern home construction and the panic inspired by its facilitation of social fluidity. Having identified reading as an act of both construction and disassembly, it urges us as readers to do the work of questioning the relationship between spatial and social constructions. Noel Polk suggests that Faulkner's disjointed narrative style is a tactic for disrupting the "dictatorial logic of [temporal] sequence" in structuring our understanding of events (9). Addressing the narrative's temporal disorder—and thus play with the notion of different times and timelines as being interchangeable—Polk argues that:

Faulkner works to destroy the generational connections that presume to connect everything with that which precedes and so create a logic to our lives that our lives resist. He constantly attacks the cohesion that chronology and genealogy supply by showing us, if we will see, how fragile they are, how susceptible to manipulation and misinterpretation, and so how tenuously they supply us with the historical certainty, the stable world, that we cling to. (10)

I would argue that his disruptions of spatial cohesion extend the effect. His own spatial mediations, be they of household, town, region, or the positioning of narrators, disrupt attempts to simplify individual experiences and collective conceptions of home and history alike. They suggest that in looking for order, stability, or truth, we can no more usefully cling to our geographical frameworks nor the smaller schemas of our more immediate, intimate spaces, the walls and designs of our very homes—or as Polk puts it, in “blood’s corollary, property” (10)—than we can find easy answers in the soothing or simplified sequences of time and bloodline.

For the text does indeed play with spatial sequencing in ways that call us to rethink the construction of social space both present and past. In addition to its denaturalization of material and linguistic building processes, it also challenges spatial logic through the complicated positioning of narrators and narrative happenings. It is useful, for instance, to consider the way in which Quentin and Shreve, as they approach their final take on Sutpen’s story, conflate themselves (as narrators) with Henry and Bon (as the subjects they narrate) and conflate the space where they’re narrating with the space where the narrated events take place. “Four of them there,” Faulkner describes, “in that room in New Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblike room in Massachusetts in 1910” (268). Their sense of self and other becomes more and more confused until Quentin’s barely suppressed rage and confusion erupt out of the tomblike room into the open air of narrative revelation (or rather, his own interpretation of events, presented as discovery). We must also note, however, that this narrative play with spatial definition has other implications as well; it fosters as much confusion as clarity—confusion between southern and northern spaces, as well as later interior and exterior spaces when the narrators are at once inside their dorm room and outside in the war camp.

Spatial confusion and conflation create a general sense of unease elsewhere as well,

raising the question of how the dissolution of spatial boundaries—or, we might say, spatial in/distinction—relates to concerns elsewhere about racial and mechanical in/distinction. When Shreve repeatedly refers to Bon's origins in "Porto Rico or Haiti or wherever it was" (239), for example, the conflation of spaces seems to suggest a dangerous attitude toward the foreign, hinting at the text's politics of empire. By denying the specificity of Bon's own spatial history, it participates in the reduction of Bon either to the primitivized animal "to whom one place was the same as another, like to a cat" or to the modernized automaton who later appears in the Sutpen garden, "gallant and elegant and automatic" (Faulkner 266). The interchangeability of foreign spaces maps racial attitudes onto imperial practices, showing American territories or targets as potentially only further cogs in the imperial machine.³⁹ Even on a smaller scale, it corroborates the sense that any given location might somehow re-enact another, that "the little lost island" of Haiti (or Porto Rico or wherever) can somehow recur "the island" Sutpen's house becomes, thus suggesting that geographical or spatial reiterations signal the repetition of past violence. The interchangeability of spaces seems to suggest the danger of getting caught in the machine, repeating isolated functions over and over without ever touching the wholeness of an idealized end product. More broadly, it grounds the text's meditations on the uncanny, mapping the difficulty of social and material distinction onto geographical space and thus reminding us that the questions of *who* and *what* one is come down to an understanding of positioning. Or to put it slightly differently, that identity is relational, sometimes quite literally, as Sutpen learned early.

The text offers a map for navigating these concerns through its view of temporal repetition when Quentin imagines the Sutpen children thinking, "*Maybe we are both father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading*" (210), a line of thought

that ends in Quentin thinking that he and Shreve are in some sense both his own father, and that maybe it took “*Thomas Sutpen to make all of us*” (210). Just as people and events in the text seem never to just happen once and be finished, places also seem to be re-iterations rather than unique, discrete locations, as in the occurrence of one house after another at which Sutpen must fight his front door battle over again. In one of his final attempts to enact his design, he makes a “*passage through the house which was an unbroken continuation of the long journey from Virginia,*” and indeed it seems that all the spaces he has passed through are connected, spreading ripples on the same pool (223). Ultimately, the spatial happening must continue because of a kind of spatial domestic uncanny: he cannot be sure whether he’s in one space or another, whether he’s inside or outside the domestic structure that eludes him, or how to stay there once he has gotten in.

Spatial conflation and confusion therefore may appear primarily as a source of discomfort, and it certainly grounds the text’s broader concern with sameness, difference, and the potential impossibility of ever knowing who we are or how we are positioned. This sense of unease reinforces the ways in which Faulkner seems to lament the possibility of social change, expressing some degree of his own nostalgia for a noble southern past, however constructed and problematic it may be. Faulkner also offers, however, a way to think about spatial and social change that transcends his own ambivalence and foregrounds the more positive potential of social change. This effect develops, in a sense, while his text is building, as he has set it up to produce interpretive possibilities beyond those of his narrators or even of his own intent. He points towards these possibilities by countering the sense of distressing spatial conflation with an idea of spatial unity that productively connects varied selves and spaces, while still allowing for a simultaneous degree of difference. This happens when Quentin and Shreve perform their

narrative doubling, and Faulkner accounts for their conflation of disparate spaces and subjectivities through the notion that they are

connected after a fashion in a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River which runs not only through the physical land ... not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature. (208)

A geographical feature dismantles the boundaries between the narrators and their narrative subjects, as well as the boundaries between their geographical and temporal locations.

Distinctions based on geographical measurements or features become meaningless, all difference dissolving into the broader whole of “Environment” which “connect[s] after a fashion” all who live in it. Rather than constructing spatial confusion as spatial uncanny—as a source of fear and discomfort—this notion presents spatial conflation—the collapse of spatial distinction—as a kind of unity or wholeness. In this moment, Faulkner presents narrative as one factor that facilitates connection across distance, identification despite difference. He presents the spatial framework of the “Environment”—the ultimate shared geography of a sort of platonic spatial context in which categories of time and space are fluid—as the other.

This notion that a spatial context can refigure disorder as unity brings us back to the liberating potential of the “h”ouse of Sutpen and its fate. If the household is made of interchangeable parts—whether its racially indistinct members or its echoes of the materials of mass-production—then those interchangeable components of a spatial order can model the possibility of a fluid social order. If the over-simplified formula of their arrangement leads to ruin, then the material and narrative destabilization of that house is the way out. There may be no help for Sutpen, who *must* fail to reveal the flaws of the system in which he works, but there is

hope for the reader, who has perhaps not yet gotten too far along in building. At Sutpen's expense, and perhaps against his own inclination to elegize as well as critique the changing Southern society, Faulkner destroys the material space Hale suggests is so essential to perpetuating and reconfiguring white supremacy. He dismantles the design itself in the process, demanding that we rethink not only our chronologies and narratives but our material coordinates as well, the spaces that frame and shape and sustain our social order.

The futility of the discrete, repeated action brings us back to Buster Keaton, whose attempt to master his own spatial instance further shows the many threats to which the standardized domestic framework is subject. The modern prefab, do-it-yourself process can be complicated by any number of factors, and notably, we see the same essential threats encroaching on Sutpen's literal house and figural House as on Keaton's. These threats add up to the sense that what McPherson calls the "modernist faith" of Fordism and related logics of standardization and mass-production belie the greater power of a variety of unpredictable, uncontrollable forces. One of these is the natural element, which appears in *One Week* in a storm that spins the house around and around, leaving the interior in total disarray as well as flinging the inhabitants into piles. Sutpen's house must struggle with a quieter, slower, but equally inexorable force of nature, the swamp out of which it was built, which seems in the end to flatten the constructed order of Sutpen's household by geographically transubstantiating it straight into the ground. This natural force essentially dissolves the house, reducing it at the first opportunity to a "*rotting shell with its sagging portico and scaling walls,*" the old street of slave quarters quickly becoming, after Sutpen's death, a "*jungle of sumach and persimmon and briers and honey-suckle, and the rotting piles of what had once been log walls*" (173). What is in a sense the unifying "Environment" of the swamp overwhelms the most basic material boundaries of the

space, its walls. The natural environment's capacity to dissolve spatial distinction proves too much for even Sutpen's modern building logic to hold back—perhaps reuniting him with that almost remembered “environment where he grew up” (184), or perhaps taking the democratizing potential of Sutpen's democratizing material logic to its end in the unity of decay. Either way, as Keaton says when the storm ravages his own house, “I guess it's not used to the climate.”

The reader, however, may have a chance at adjusting by recognizing that neither the House of Sutpen, nor the still broader narrative the text constructs out of its own moveable elements, quite resolves into a stable construction. If, as Polk discusses, Faulkner challenges the forcing of narrative and history into a standard formation and alerts us to the power of sequencing in influencing perception, we must also be wary of the narrative and spatial sequences he has provided, disordered as they already may be. The truly fluid structure continues to adapt, just as Keaton and his wife walk rather cheerfully away from their demolished home to make a go of arranging different parts in different ways, somewhere else. Though *Absalom, Absalom!* does not invite quite so light-hearted a response, it does seem to suggest that in light of the deeply flawed conclusions its narrators make, we would do well to remember that the narrative arc they create is as artificial as the ones they were given, that the parts they have given us are still moveable, and that we mustn't make Sutpen's mistake of not doing the reading ourselves. Rather, the text suggests, overall, that both spatial and narrative disorder opens necessary spaces, creates productive confusion, and pushes us to reconsider how we constitute our private spaces and along with them our private lives and our interior constructions of social order. It suggests, ultimately, that our best hope may lie in the mismatches and disjunctures, in starting with the pile of rubble rather than the “Directions” and making of it what we will.

Notes

¹ For instance, she discusses *Light in August* as Faulkner's turning point "away from pastoral to the language and imagery of American Gothicism, which had already by the mid-nineteenth century claimed slavery and race as the repressed otherness of American history" (369). Citing his depiction of labor in this text as a hard, tedious, and racialized endeavor far from the sort of idealized farm work portrayed by the Southern Agrarians, Donaldson shows that Faulkner tends here towards "disrupting pastoral associations and images" and invests himself, rather, in exploring the ways in which Joe Christmas's racial indeterminacy activates the white community's anxiety and fear about irrepressible otherness. *Absalom, Absalom!*, coming after *Light in August*, certainly continues the trend Donaldson discusses in that it, too, problematizes pastoral associations and imagery and seems to concern itself more emphatically—indeed, to torture itself—with the exploration of the gothic specter Martin Kreisworth calls the "racial uncanny," the dilemma of not only not being able to choose between categories of race, but of not even being able to distinguish between them (128). Both of these readings and the critical trends they represent accurately and importantly highlight the significance of gothic language and imagery, and of racial valences of the uncanny, in *Light in August* and later works, including *Absalom, Absalom!*. However, Faulkner's gothic investments and imagery by no means negate his ongoing engagement with the pastoral ideal and its many complications. More specifically, I would argue that his problematizing of the pastoral does not so much signal a turn away from it to the gothic as much as it registers an increasingly loud conversation between the two frameworks, as I will discuss in greater detail below through my consideration of how a "racial" and "technological" or "mechanical" uncanny may interact in the text.

² The suggestive reference to the banana peel in *Light in August* is one of Faulkner's more explicit reference to the slapstick comedy of the silent film era, but it could be said that more generally, as Alan Dale comments, "Faulkner doesn't stage a slapstick episode; he describes slapstick as an elemental aspect of existence" (10).

³ See Robert Knopf (41) in *The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton* for a full discussion of Keaton's structure here as playing on the conceits of vaudeville. Knopf identifies the vaudeville's "flexible structure" as depending upon audience response, such that acts could be "reshuffled on demand," night by night, to "adapt to the differing tastes of individual audiences." The show, then, was "never organized with a narrative through-line or any sort of thematic coherence" but rather privileged variety (39). Knopf argues that *One Week* organizes its parody of Fordism

through this structure, breaking the house-building process down into seven days' worth of comic episodes. Each of these segments "functions as a discreet unit (with rising action and a "topper"), and Keaton modulates the rising action of the entire film along the same line" (Knopf 41). As Knopf suggests, this form showcases Keaton's comedic and filmic prowess by "modulating his vast array of performance skills within each episode and between them," and I would add that it enhances Keaton's critique by invoking the vaudeville conceit of structural elements that can be shuffled on demand while exploring the consequences of shuffling the structural elements of the American dream house. Both kinds of disorder produce novelty and hilarity. And while vaudeville shuffling may privilege the immediate and fleeting response, Keaton takes this effect further to direct his audience's response at a folly of modernity, the misplaced faith in formulaic constructions of happiness, success, security, and the many other notions coded into American homeownership. Though a full comparison is beyond the scope of this discussion, I would suggest that in this regard, the film's structure, along with its thematic focus, offers a promising way of reading *Absalom, Absalom!*

⁴ Cloaked in gloom thought it may often be.

⁵ To some extent, I draw here on Jay Watson's notion of the "material unconscious," which separates the significance of an excess of a certain kind of material in a text—in this case wood in *Light in August*—from the significance of clearly metaphorical and symbolic uses of that material in the text—such as a wooden cross. I discuss the building process as a material process which signifies on its own, in addition to the text's metaphoric use of it, but I also lean away from Watson's approach in that I am more interested in exploring the interaction between the less clearly metaphorical—in this case the building of Sutpen's "house"—and the more clearly symbolic—i.e., building the "House of Sutpen." For Watson's full discussion, see Watson, Jay, "The Philosophy of Furniture, or *Light in August and the Material Unconscious*."

⁶ Wald quotes, here, a Cold War era speech in which Faulkner explores the state of the American dream and critiques white Mississippians' racial fears. For the full discussion, see "Atomic Faulkner." The speech and discussion offer interesting perspective on the issues of social and spatial domestic arrangement because Faulkner seems, in the speech, to reinforce the *Absalom, Absalom!*'s suggestion that a much broader world of political interaction is fundamentally experienced, and must be parsed, through the individuals' experience and conception of their own material living spaces. And further, that just as the material, immediate domestic space filters individuals'

experience of a broader (but still domestic/national) racial politics, the conceptual space of “domestic”/national racial politics filters individuals’ experience of the still broader, inter-national politics of Cold War tensions.

⁷ See for instance William Ruzicka, *Faulkner’s Fictive Architecture*, especially Chapter Four.

⁸ Sears was the largest of a small array of companies who offered this type of home kit. Other companies to offer this type of house kit included Montgomery Ward, Alladin Homes, and Sterling System-Built Homes. Though others were also successful, Stevenson and Jandl note that Sears was the largest and most popular for a variety of reasons, including their attunement to American taste, their reputation for quality at a good price, their appealing loan system, and the speed and ease of construction made possible by the offer of “precut lumber at a time when power tools were almost unknown” (Stevenson and Jandl 19).

⁹ As Karen Halttunen points out in “From Parlor to Living Room,” even Downing’s hodgepodge leanings would come to seem unified in relation to later approaches to home design. Downing might liven things up by approving of two different rooms having two different period styles, but, having “assigned different characteristics to period furnishings” he “advised a unity of style within each room and suggested styles that should be adopted in particular rooms of the house: the social gaiety of the Italian style was suited to the drawing room, while the domestic gravity of the Gothic” suited it to the library, and so on, whereas “[b]y contrast, interior decorators in the early twentieth century advocated a mixture of period furnishings within each room as the best method of expressing the nuances of personality” (Halttunen 183).

¹⁰ That being said, we might also note that the difficulty of his labor in carving, or should we say “tearing violently,” a home out of his wild, dense swamp land does invoke iconic frontier conditions, and, as William Cronon discusses, kit homes are associated with the frontier, in that they were popular with people who were developing the frontier spaces into which the railroad extended. See Cronon, William, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*.

¹¹ I am indebted to Banta, as this chapter relies heavily on her work *Taylorized Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford*, which productively explores the importance of scientific management, Taylorism, and Fordism to American literature in general and also offers a rare extended critical reading of the Sears house kit ad copy and house models from a literary point of view.

¹² Though both styles built on the potential of mass-production, Fuller perhaps leaned further in this direction, in the sense that, as the Editors of “Fortune” claimed in their early 30s text *Housing America*, Fuller looked towards a future “scattered population living in cheap, speedily-assembled single or multiple-family houses which may be

taken down, transported, and reassembled almost at will. And which will be replaced at five-year intervals or at ten-year intervals as automobiles are now replaced" (155), a true "Machine-For-Living" that eschewed the more traditional "brick and mortar" architectural problems for a self-sustaining domestic machine that would hang from a central duralumin mast, full of modern, efficient systems that would keep it "as nearly free from the political nuisances of city water and city sewage and city electricity and city lights as may be" (155). Wright's homes, on the other hand, while operating on a modernist aesthetic quite distinct from the Sears hodgepodge Victorian, were meant, in a similar way, to provide functional, low-cost modern housing that could be realistically made available to and lived in by the average American.

¹³ The role of reading in the building process—or even *as* the building process—is further emphasized in one of the Sears Modern Homes Division's catalogues describing the "Honor Bilt" process. Again the minimization of labor is emphasized as the copy explains that all the hard work is "taken care of in our factory" by "efficient machines." It goes on to note, though, that "[e]ach piece is marked with key letter or length which corresponds with those on the blueprints showing the exact location in which it is to be used" (Stevenson and Jandl 28). Thus, the builder's primary work is, again, the work of reading, as the copy suggests that once the materials arrive, the buyer can assemble them by simply matching up readings of the key letters or other figures on the building element to readings of the blueprints.

¹⁴ By way of further contrast, I would note that in one instance Sears offers photos of one of its simpler house models rising in stages over the course of a single day. A large clock in the foreground shows the passing of mere hours, and the presumed builders are present in the photos but stand around in neutral or reposing attitudes that could be those of bystanders as easily as those of laborers (Stevenson and Jandl 31).

¹⁵ It also alerts us, I would argue, to the degree to which we might think of this text as a male-centered domestic novel. In addition to the text's deep engagement with gender issues beyond the scope of this chapter, a detail such as this baking metaphor takes part in a larger trend in the novel of exploring how gender and home-making interact and indeed, what the dimensions of home-making are in the first place. The novel deals in many ways with tropes traditionally considered part of the "domestic novel" tradition, from parenting to gender identity and domestic practice, to particulars of interior decorating. Though it complicates these things more often than not, such complications do not exclude it from the realm of the literary domestic but expand our notion of what a domestic novel or plot might entail.

¹⁶ See Jon Smith, “Faulkner, Metropolitan Fashion, and ‘The South,’” for a discussion of Flem Snopes’ architectural pretensions in *The Mansion*.

¹⁷ For a full discussion, see Veblen, Thorstein, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

¹⁸ For an extended discussion of the significance of these forms of rural consumerism, see Thomas Schlereth, “Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America.”

¹⁹ Indeed, to the degree we most explicitly see commerce afoot in *Absalom, Absalom!*, it seems to register the failing Southern economy rather than a rising national economy. Mr. Coldfield’s crossroads store, for instance, never having prospered, falters as the war begins. Sutpen himself is a shopkeeper after the war, but he is “*brung*...to keeping a little country store for his bread and meat” (231, emphasis mine) with Wash Jones; this shift reflects the failure of his plantation and hard-won social position rather than rising entrepreneurship. As such, these images reinforce the idea of Faulkner as a pastoralist protesting Northern industrialization’s march against an idealized agrarian South.

²⁰ See Sara Gerend, “‘My Son, My Son!’: Paternalism, Haiti, and Early Twentieth-Century American Imperialism in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” for a reading that prioritizes these issues, arguing that the novel “clearly dramatizes America’s paternalist ideology regarding Haiti and emerges as a significant text in the culture of early twentieth-century U.S. empire” (18). Gerend explores the possibility that Sutpen’s time abroad is in fact spent in an imagined Haiti that simultaneously invokes concerns about American imperialism and raises its own set of questions about reconstructions of history and place.

²¹ Though *The Magnolia* follows a different architectural model to do so, its embodiment of a cultured ideal aligns it with one of the houses in Oxford, MS, that may have been an inspiration for the Sutpen house. Thomas Hines notes that “The grandest antebellum house in Oxford that was neither neoclassical nor neo-Gothic was the ‘Italianate’ mansion designed in 1859 for the Pegues family” by Calvert Vaux (83). The Italian style was considered by Vaux’s partner, Andrew Jackson Downing, to be “‘far better suited to symbolize the variety of refined culture and accomplishment which belongs to modern civilization than almost any other style’” (Hines 85). While this house was itself built from Vaux’s original drawings, Vaux was famous for his *Villas and Cottages*, a pattern-book of the sort that prefigured the kit home design packages. The connection to Vaux, Hines suggests, may explain Faulkner’s repeated use of the “French Architect” character (83). Though Vaux was in fact London-born, Hines suggests that Faulkner must have recognized the French origins of the name (83). If this is the case, it strengthens the suggestion

that Sutpen's house, for all its emphasis on originality and hand-crafting, also invokes the specific tension between the unique splendor of Vaux's Pegues house and the large-scale replication of domestic designs which Vaux's work helped to bring about—a tension clearly expressed in the marketing of *The Magnolia*.

²² For a fuller discussion of these sorts of concerns in *Modern Times* and more generally, see Lawrence Howe, "Charlie Chaplin in the age of Mechanical Reproduction: Reflexive Ambiguity in *Modern Times*."

²³ As Simon Bronner points out, for instance, that rise had begun earlier still: "Roots of the consumer system in the United States predate the twentieth century and can be followed well back to the seeds of the New Republic, although [its] mass proportions...arise distinctly in the late nineteenth century. Mass retailing at fixed prices, national distribution of advertising, and elaborate displays were signs of new relations towards goods, shifting attitudes toward society, and fresh arguments over society's future direction" (7). Spanning as it does the time between Sutpen's mid-to-late-19th-century maneuverings and the text's early 20th-century narration, the novel could be seen to stage this very shift, as the 19th-century rumblings of mass-culture erupt into its large-scale enactment around and after the turn of the century.

²⁴ Again we need only look to the Sears homes for an example; sales were concentrated in the more railway-dense Midwest and the Northeast, and the expanding Modern Homes Department established all of its offices "east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon line" (Stevenson and Jandl 21). Rising "consumership," as Simon Bronner calls this expanding culture of consumption at the turn of the century (8), played out differently in the North than in the South.

²⁵ It would also be worthwhile to further consider his moves, throughout this process, from domestic-national settings to domestic space created in a foreign, potentially imperial setting, and back again to domestic-home space on domestic-national land. We might see this process, for instance, as modeling what Rosemary Marangoly George discusses in *The Politics of Home* as the process whereby disenfranchised citizens—particularly British women keeping house in British colonies, in her discussion—achieve greater civic status and self-realization abroad by dominating the local, colonized subjects. Despite his gender position, Sutpen begins in a clearly marginalized class position, and his own time keeping house abroad—in the position of running a plantation rather than being excluded by slaves from privileged white plantation spaces—seems to transform him into both an adult and a figure of power and domination. In addition to providing a framework for reading this transformation, which is largely shrouded in mystery in the text, this perspective reveals one of the alignments between Sutpen's narrative and similar scenarios

involving female protagonists and thus more commonly being read as “domestic fiction.” Insofar as housekeeping has been discussed as a trope that focuses the intertwined politics of gender and imperialism, Sutpen’s story is as important an example as any, and could enrich critical perspectives on domestic fiction as a genre that includes male- as well as female-centered and/or –authored texts.

²⁶ Frederick Douglass, for instance, famously does not know his birthday and begins his narrative by portraying, through such examples, the degree to which he’s been denied self-knowledge and –ownership. Booker T. Washington notes a similarly limited knowledge of his birth place and date in his autobiography

²⁷ See Chapter One.

²⁸ We might note here as well that while Faulkner’s novels use the term “carpetbagger” to refer to Yankees who moved South during Reconstruction, another notion of the carpetbagger would be the traveling salesman or “drummer” who helped to develop rural consumerism (Schlereth 355).

²⁹ In addition to the question of racialization and the complicated implications thereof, when a mail-order catalogue does appear in Faulkner’s work, it appears in the form of toilet paper, as when Ruby offers Temple leaves from a catalogue to use in the privy in *Sanctuary*. Explaining this in order to point out the association of the infamous corncob in *Sanctuary* with excrement, Marius notes that “In the North the privy might have a Sears-Roebuck catalogue. In the South the privy was more likely to have a pile of corncobs in the corner” (82). The mail-order catalogue, then, may be the Charmin of rustic toilet papers, but in Faulkner’s world it is as likely to represent excrement as the charm of having products of the far-away “modern” and high-class world appear on your doorstep.

³⁰ Faulkner’s use of the word “burlesque” here also reminds us of the possibility that the text hints at the world of vaudeville, viewing not only Charles Etienne and not only the African American race, but the whole collection of characters joined together in this narrative, as figures in a tragic farce of sorts.

³¹ See for instance Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, especially Chapter Three: “Imagined Pleasures: The Erotics and Aesthetics of Consumption.”

³² See again Jon Smith, “Faulkner, Metropolitan Fashion, and ‘The South’” for a discussion of concerns about fashion and class in *The Mansion* as opposed to the more straightforward way in which, in earlier texts such as *Absalom, Absalom!*, characters “have generally, in their progress from peasantry to respectability, amassed design objects solely as markers of their status: what Shreve McCannon mercilessly calls Thomas Sutpen’s ‘crystal tapestries and ... Wedgewood chairs’” (Smith 94). While I would argue that the status display is far from

straightforward in Sutpen's case, either, Smith nonetheless demonstrates the complexity of Snopes' class performance and display.

³³ And indeed, his treatment of Sutpen's partial, temporary success hints at the ways in which such power can be used, in a sense, for good. To begin with, before his fall, Sutpen does manage to attain a kind of class identity and dignity. And in a sense, despite the disaster that befalls both the literal house and the genealogical line, Rosa signals one way in which Sutpen's project succeeds, in that the *name* of Sutpen's plantation lives on (in this text and others of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha) as though it were the very King's grant he intended it to sound like.

³⁴ We might even go so far as to wonder whether the "u" is left out because "you," the builder, hardly need to take part in the building.

³⁵ Built on an exceptional scale in the 1890s—not excepting the biggest of all imaginable courthouses, we might say—it continues to be advertised as the largest residence in America, the Siegel family's efforts notwithstanding.

³⁶ This split pushes against Quentin's thought, moments earlier, of a more whole and less material idea of construction, that of the builders enacting Sutpen's Hundred into being through the biblical speech act, "*Be Sutpen's Hundred*" (Faulkner 4). Though the key point for our purposes here is the tension between narrative perspectives, Quentin's contemplation of building as a speech act more generally contributes to the sense that material and narrative construction work together in the text.

³⁷ The sense of the house having or developing autonomy in some way also speaks to some people's feeling that mass-production would ultimately lead to confusion between people and machines, an idea that connects in interesting ways to modern developments that *do* integrate technology with the human body in various ways.

³⁸ Though, when Sutpen fights his slaves, their blood is described as "merely look[ing] like grease or sweat" (Faulkner 21), as though they *cannot* bleed but only sublimate pain and injury into labor.

³⁹ This suggestion also recasts Sutpen's colonial architecture as the architecture of colonialism, thus showing the continuum of conquest between intra- and inter-national efforts to dominate a given social order.

Chapter Four

“Home Thoughts”: Domestic Disarray and Buffet Flat Belonging in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*

In the recent collection *The Muse in Bronzeville*, Robert Bone and Richard Courage argue that during the 1930s and 40s, Chicago’s South Side “experienced a period...[that was] comparable in achievement and scope to the Harlem Renaissance” (xv). In addition to revising critical formulations of African American history from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, such work questions our attachments to the historical, material, and geographical parameters of our critical categories. What do we gain by seeing the geographical space of the Harlem Renaissance as an origin point rather than a container, for instance? By seeing Harlem as an ideological space located on the island of Manhattan but part of a vital continuum with other material sites of production? Several years before the Chicago Renaissance that Bone and Courage propose, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* raises a series of related concerns that seem to presage a shift in creative energy away from Harlem as well as to draw attention to what Harlem means as a geographical and conceptual frame. Indeed, the protagonist, Jake, whose intention of going home to Harlem gives the novel its name, sets out at last for Chicago instead. That being said, his move does not confirm the failure of Harlem as a home for the African American individual or cultural movement of the 1920s. Rather, it is this very tension between location and dislocation, between home and the journeys to and from it, which characterizes McKay’s Harlem and gives such force to the novel’s suggestion that home is not a house or a neighborhood but an aspirational state. McKay’s Harlem, finally, is something to find not by arriving there but by continually asking what it means to belong in it and whether its essence may indeed be movable.

Such distinctions depend on what I will suggest McKay presents as a paradox of domestic materiality and mobility, a deep imbrication of the text's oft-noted sensual world with the ways in which Jake's material experience of Harlem dismantles and rearranges more straightforward ideas of location and signification. In particular, certain material domestic spaces—including apartments, boats, trains, and buffet flats—serve as figures for the text's broader concerns about what home means and why it matters for the modern subject. Too often, and not least in his own time, the vivid materiality of McKay's sensual Harlem has foreclosed its subtler implications for readers, when in fact a closer consideration of the history and particularity of its material sites reveals the narrative's commitment to portraying domestic spaces—the forms of “home”—as modeling the racial and spatial dynamics of broader social and civic inclusion. The cultural history of these spaces, and in particular the space of the “buffet flats” so prominent in the novel, helps to illuminate a kind of spatial play in the text as well as to signal a broader philosophy of intellectual and physical mobility as the only answer to dynamics of racial surveillance and discipline that would render any home space untenable.

By investigating the significance of these material spaces in the text, I join in a broader critical effort to illuminate the richness and importance of McKay's less appreciated works. Much of this scholarship focuses productively on the transnational dynamics and implications of McKay's material. Leah Rosenberg demonstrates, for instance, how McKay rejects European modernist primitivism in the novel *Banjo*, fighting the joint sexualization and feminization of black male subjects to assert instead a stateless black hero who represents an appreciation of the embodied and cultural history of transnational blackness while maintaining his masculinity. Rosenberg argues that this tactic, epitomized in the anti-bourgeois homosocial pairing of Banjo and Ray—who first appears as Jake's friend in *Home to Harlem*—represents a distinctive

Caribbean modernism that operates alongside but actively distinguishes itself from the Anglo-European tradition. While similarly concerned with Ray's significance, John Lowney focuses more on *Home to Harlem's* investment in the Haitian cultural context and its insistent if uneven pairing of Jake and Ray's respective trajectories. Lowney suggests that the general failure of critics to recognize the importance of Ray's story-line and background mirrors the blindness of African Americans, among others, to Haiti's ongoing struggle with the U.S. occupation at the time of the novel's publication. This dual blindness, he suggests, also accounts for the widespread failure of McKay's contemporaries as well as more recent readers to recognize the political and aesthetic significance of the text.

These and other such commentaries importantly broaden our understanding of the cultural work McKay's prose fiction performs. Nonetheless, others call for fuller attention to questions of space and materiality as well as to the specific question of how domestic space and practice may be essential rather than antithetical to a full formulation of modernism. In light of such concerns, I would argue that it is equally essential to examine McKay's smaller as well as larger frameworks: in this case, to read carefully his local and interior spaces as well as his global frameworks. Though Harlem represents a focal point for both physical-geographical and cultural-intellectual transnational circuits, it also importantly remains a material location in the U.S., its material features conveying specific cultural histories and patterns of use that imbue Jake's day-to-day experience with the implications of specific local practices and histories. By maintaining our focus on Jake's immediate surroundings—in particular the more and less easily recognizably domestic spaces in which he lives and works—we can see how McKay's transnational politics work in tandem with a deep investment in exploring the limitations and the potential of Harlem in particular and the U.S. more broadly as a sustainable home.

McKay constantly stages the potential of the “home” to facilitate both inclusion and exclusion, belonging and exile—first in Jake’s ostensible purpose of going “home to Harlem” (9), and then in his project of attempting to be at home in Harlem once he gets there. The novel opens with Jake working as a stoker on a freight ship. Having stayed mobile for a while after leaving the army during WWI, and lamenting the filth, discomfort, and antagonism of life on the freighter, he now cares only that the ship is “taking him back home” to Harlem at last (3). Jake then arrives in Harlem only to move through a series of lodging spaces, relationships, and occupations, all of which position him as domestically transient as well as amplify the theme of domestic spaces as transient themselves, as in the case of the freighter and the train. McKay’s privileging—and even celebration—of transient lifestyles, however, contributed to the controversy surrounding his work, as more conservative black critics and readers considered his portrayal of the so-called black “underworld” uncouth at best and race betrayal at worst. It is therefore all the more vital to note the true complexity of the transience McKay presents, and in particular, the novel’s suggestion that it can be seen as a necessary mode of resilience and flexibility rather than weakness or promiscuity. Ultimately McKay presents the journey “home” as a perpetual negotiation between the idea that a sustainable domestic life may be available only through constant movement and the idea that what seem to be the most fixed of material spaces may in fact model, ultimately, a transcendence of limiting schemes both spatial and social.

Towards Domestic Felicity

One vital framework for Jake’s suggestive domestic ramblings is that just after arriving in Harlem, he meets his ideal woman, spends a night with her, and then loses her the next day. His ongoing search for domestic fulfillment then shifts from Harlem, where he now resides, to the

dream of this woman, whom he can't find because he can't recall her address, her own domestic coordinates. Throughout the novel, furthermore, his enjoyment of the unanchored lifestyle becomes more and more infused with thoughts of past and future domestic settlement: the "little frame house" (216) he grew up in "down home in Virginia" (281) on the one hand, and on the other, "his little lost brown," whose lost lodging "lived in his mind a highly magnified affair" (114). These thoughts are united by his specific desire not just for sex or even a generic idea of love but for a love modeled on that of his parents, as he articulates a desire for "[s]ome'n real fond o' you for you own self lak, lak—jest lak how mah mammy useter love pa and do everything foh him" (212). Desiring a woman of his own that he could "go home [to] and be his simple self with," but also with whom he could be a "spoiled child" again (212), he figures his future desires in terms of home and family relations, if indeed complex ones that set a desire to be fully taken care of by one's lover against a desire to maintain individuality within partnership. Finally, Jake finds his lost girl again. Her name turns out to be Felice, and she does indeed seem to represent not only his happiness, but also his intention to settle down by way of domestic and romantic felicity if not geographical stability.

Hazel Carby views this trajectory of Jake's as "his journey to become a man" (750), a project of black masculinity within which urban black women operate "as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order" (747). That is, Felice must be narratively transformed from the prostitute she seems to be at the first meeting to the wholesome girl she proves to be later, as Jake constructs his own wholesome masculinity against the unruly sexuality of the various women he encounters between these meetings. While the narrative does indeed persistently discipline the black female body, I would argue that Jake's

trend toward settled domesticity also complicates this dynamic. For he and Felice move together from apparent promiscuity to apparent devotion, setting out to make or find a new home together as his own desire for domestic fulfillment increases.

Although Jake remains committed to himself above others—being ready to go on to Chicago without Felice in the end if she fails to meet him—the text resists simply gendering impulses toward commitment or promiscuity. For while Jake muses on his past and future home life, his friend Ray’s girlfriend Agatha expresses to him how she envies the anonymity of his work on the railroad as opposed to the “awful personal everyday contact that domestic workers have to get along with” (210). Though Ray later figures Agatha’s domestic yearnings as oppressive, and the pair of them as “slaves of the civilized tradition” of marriage and family (263), it is important that McKay first positions her as trapped in a commercial relation to the domestic that corrupts its charms. The racial politics of female domestic labor, in this case, cast a shadow of unwanted and coerced intimacy over any straightforward alignment of women with contented domestic life, while the erotic connotations of Agatha’s railroad thoughts confirm that female as well as male desires for fleeting and anonymous intimacies are smothered by the “civilized tradition” Ray rails against.

Whatever Ray’s objections, other instances of male interest in home-making are plentiful. Often, however, they are folded into the tricky implications of “living sweet” or otherwise problematized, as when Jake’s friend Zeddy is called out as a “skirt-man” for his attempts to “start housekeeping with a steady home-loving woman” and must fight to prove his masculinity (238). Jake’s domestic longings, on the other hand, are authorized, ultimately, by their occurring alongside rather than in opposition to his capacity to keep moving. One of Jake’s associates admires him in these terms, noting that Jake is not too tied to either gambling, or dope, or desire,

but rather, “Jake took what he wanted of whatever he fancied and...kept going” (269). Jake’s domesticity, then, which exists in concert with this impulse toward mobility, is implied to be one of both attachment and liberty, both settlement and movement: one that is fundamentally adaptable to shifting needs rather than unhealthily fixed to the point of excess or addiction, states which do characterize other domestic relations in the novel. For all the portrayals of the constant mobility of life on boats and trains, then, or of the transient and thus, in the eyes of some, morally suspect lifestyles of working-class Harlemites,¹ the novel powerfully suggests that it is in fact the capacity for mobility, for a kind of domestic contingency, that sustains a healthy domestic and emotional life.

Domestic Disarray: Spatial Modernism from Neighborhood to Nation

We might view Jake’s mobility as an example of McKay’s transnational cosmopolitanism, the “statelessness and internationalism” Rosenberg identifies in regards to Ray’s reappearance in the later novel *Banjo* (235). She notes that in this work, “[c]haracters are able to form social and sexual alliances that counter the alienating effects of capitalism, colonialism, and bourgeois respectability only once they have physically and intellectually abandoned their nationality” (235). In *Home to Harlem*, however, Jake finds his way to such an alliance with Felice without wholly abandoning his nationality. For while his army desertion may constitute an intellectual disavowal of the nation, he importantly remains in the United States even when the threat of punishment looms; even in this crisis, he muses that he is entangled in “his America” (328), and Felice reinforces that sense of ownership, however vexed, when she convinces Jake to run to Chicago rather than abroad because ““This heah is you’ country” (332). Ray’s pointed reappearance on the shores of another novel may suggest that McKay considers

this figure the purer expression of the trans-national black modernist hero. Jake's more bounded experience, however, illustrates a critical step toward that fuller vision by commenting on the potential for living a liberated domestic (private) life within given domestic (national) bounds. In this regard, the text demands that we think about intra- as well as inter-national mobility, citizenship as well as cosmopolitanism.

For the central question in *Home to Harlem* is, of course, that of what it means to come home to Harlem, a space that is in many ways cast as transnational and transcendent, but that is also unavoidably grounded in a concretely located American history of racial conflict. McKay asks us to consider whether such a homecoming is possible under such conditions, whether for Jake or the many other black Americans who re-located there during the Great Migration, not to mention for the "New Negro" movement that was in many ways animated by that influx of people. By examining the features and implications of Jake's model of mobile domestic life in this spatial and geographical context, we can see how McKay's representations of various home spaces comment on the nature of Harlem not only as a site of personal and racial belonging but also as a site for negotiating the belonging of African American individuals in the nation at large and the place of African American cultural production—indeed the place of this text itself—in the American literary tradition more broadly.

McKay foregrounds questions of housing, race, and national belonging by presenting Jake early on as someone who has deserted during WWI out of frustration with how the army has constructed his domesticity. Jake has left because the army "didn't seem to want us niggers foh no soldiers" (331) but instead has given black soldiers a military equivalent of menial domestic work that involved building huts for the white soldiers who were allowed to do the fighting Jake considers the real work of the war. Jake receives this racial sidelining as a dual

threat to his masculinity and civic legitimacy. The resulting frustration propels him from his post and into a state of perpetual motion, as the threat of discipline hounds him from then on. His refusal to serve the nation by way of being a home-maker, as it were, for the “real,” i.e. white, American soldiers makes him an outlaw, subjecting him to possible punishment by the military as well as betrayal by friends who know his situation. The trope of housing works here, then, to register the attenuated social citizenship of Jake and other black soldiers who remain outsiders even as they join in the national effort of the war. Ultimately, he will not accept racial subordination and laboring behind the scenes to make more comfortable homes for white soldiers to experience their fuller belonging in. Instead, Jake begins his own project of homecoming.

He conducts this journey towards his Harlem home on an international freighter where domestic materiality similarly serves to register degrees of belonging. We first meet Jake when he is working on the boat with what he considers “a filthy Arab crew,” a claim he illustrates by detailing their domestic habits, from their refusal of pork—for which the ship’s cooks “hated” them (1)—to the fact, “strange to Jake,” that they “washed themselves after eating and not before” (2). Jake will ultimately be distinguished for many readers and critics by his own comfort in what McKay’s severest critics perceived as the bowels of black society. One of his first acts in the text, however, is to reject these other non-white figures as impossible to digest. For though “Jake was used to the lowest and hardest sort of life...even his leather-lined stomach could not endure the Arabs’ way of eating. Jake also began to despise the Arabs” (2). This domestically-inflected imagery of the acts of cooking and eating delineates between the protagonist and cultural outsiders. Further, it establishes a platform for prejudice against such outsiders. In this case, the effect is to position Jake as domestically normative just before

revealing his deviation from the housing-related role the nation has assigned him. These scenes, which commence the novel's insistence on finding "home" as the ultimate goal, work together from the start to represent individuals' relation to domestic space and practice as expressing degrees of social and civic belonging, with race and ethnicity as key mediating factors. They also set up a tension between domesticities imposed by larger political entities and one's own preferred modes of relating to domestic space and practice.

These incidents establish a pattern for Jake in which domestic felicity becomes available only through continued movement. This pattern permeates representations of particular domestic spaces and practices, as Jake continues throughout the novel to be always and never at home, sometimes occupying the materially mobile home spaces of boat and train and otherwise continually changing his residence from flat to flat around Harlem. This sense of stability—or at least of a relatively sustainable domestic happiness and fulfillment—through movement is also suggested by the novel's broader arc of perpetual homecoming, as Jake's project of going "home to Harlem" proves to be a continual quest that leads, ultimately, ever elsewhere. And while these images of home as a protean state are most evident in the material settings and events of the novel, the persistent destabilization of the domestic also structures the novel's broader commentary on what home can mean, how belonging and exile can work together, and how literary construction can expose, trouble, and re-imagine social constructions of belonging.

McKay's persistent domestic destabilizations foreground not only a theme of restlessness but also a formal expression of domestic disarray, with such scenes and schemes operating as a modernist dis-arrangement of familiar tropes of gender, labor, and domesticity. So often too easily glossed as the varied ramblings of a freeborn man, Jake's story is full of domestic inversions and displacements that beg more serious attention. Jake's wartime quasi-domestic

labor is only one among many such elusively valenced activities. On both ship and train, for instance, as well as at the buffet flat parties I will discuss in greater detail below, Jake works and plays in environments that are cast as masculinized hybrids of domestic and commercial space. These spaces that have something in common with what Susan Edmunds characterizes as the “domestic exterior” (5), the nexus of home, state, and market in which she sees modernists turning the tropes of domestic fiction inside out. In *Home to Harlem*, these spaces are at once appropriately and disconcertingly filled with conventionally domestic behaviors that stage, though in a slightly displaced way, the domestic labors, disputes, and practices more readily acknowledged as such when they occur in more conventionally recognized, i.e., predominantly feminine, settings.

Consider, for instance, the head chef in the train kitchen where Jake goes to work “just to break the hold that Harlem had on him” (125). The chef is a paradox of domestic im/perfection. Described as “hated” and “repulsive in every aspect,” this “great black bundle of consciously suppressed desires” is nonetheless “one of the model chefs of the service,” with a “well-ordered kitchen” and a knack for feeding everyone well and on time (160). The emphasis on suppressing unruly desires aligns him with more conventionally female domestic ideals. Meanwhile, the chef’s contradicting qualities also importantly echo Jake’s wartime labor. Here, too, McKay yokes military and domestic practice by distilling the chef’s skills into the claim that “[i]n a word, he did his duty as only a martinet can” (161), a triumph that also encompasses his stated ability to effectively support his wife and child. The chef’s militant model domesticity at once sustains and antagonizes the crew, touching off a “war” (McKay 165) between the pantry and the kitchen.

This domestic dispute, as it were, occurs in the quasi-domestic setting of a militarized, mobile, commercial kitchen, between the non-traditional disputants of kitchen and pantry staff rather than domestic partners. It is striking, however, that it materially displaces but otherwise draws heavily on the more recognizable trope of the domestic dispute between family members in the home, thus calling into question whether it is the material setting of the home that makes a dispute “domestic” or whether it is the nature of the practices involved: the contention over how best to provide nourishment and comfort for those in one’s care, the intertwining of power struggles with intimate practices of food production and consumption. In another sense, it imports the militaristic elements of the pantry war into a more general notion of domestic practice, refiguring home-making as a space of subtle but serious combat. The important issue is that these disarranged elements and unfamiliar manifestations of traditional domestic tropes are commonplace in the novel. Home as we know it is everywhere and nowhere, as much a concern for the reader as for Jake himself.

The question, then, is what to make of the ways in which McKay denaturalizes the domestic realm itself, un- and re-attaching links between gender and labor, place and practice. At the very least, this approach further aligns McKay with what Edmunds identifies as modernist domestic fiction that “deform[s] and estrange[s]” its more traditional and genteel forms, “shuffling its contents and upending its conventions until...it becomes unrecognizable as such” (4). Edmunds sees these domestic reconstitutions as the locus of U.S. modernists’ alienation from a rising welfare state that depended on promoting “a sentimental domestic model for all white citizens” (15). The racist bent of this model is a critical detail for white and black authors alike who aimed to represent and resist the pressures the “newly engaged state” exerted on communities and individuals struggling to define themselves amidst the social instabilities of

the 1920s (Edmunds 15). In particular, Edmunds demonstrates how Jean Toomer works, in both *Natalie Mann* and *Cane*, to “expose an underlying continuity between the repressive regime of domestic respectability and the brutally oppressive order of southern lynch law.” In these works, narrative distortions of domesticity work to critique goals of racial assimilation into the “current bourgeois democratic order,” proposing instead “an alternative, antidomestic social vision anchored in the art and culture of the rural black folk and the newly urban black working class” (Edmunds 67). Toomer exposes projects of domestic “respectability” as grotesque in themselves, tools of rather than against racist oppression.

In *Home to Harlem*, racial violence is largely submerged, surfacing in the occasional speakeasy brouhaha and simmering the rest of the time in the politics of access to Harlem as a space of racial expression and consciousness on the one hand, and tourism and surveillance on the other. Jake, however, embodies the newly urban black working class in question, at once longing for and purposely distancing himself from the increasingly idealized space and family relations of his history “down home in Virginia” (281). McKay’s vision, I would argue, is not so much anti- as elastically domestic, allowing for social relations that aspire to domestic fulfillment while detaching such felicity from the usual racialized bourgeois moorings. His narrative approach, while more traditional than Toomer’s, similarly turns the domestic inside out until it becomes “unrecognizable as such,” formally as well as thematically atomizing the components of a more traditional representation of “home” and rendering them the moveable units of shifting, multi-valenced domestic constructions that similarly protest a regime of respectability while more obliquely attaching that social protest to a civic one. For Jake’s ultimate prospect of settling is thwarted not only by his own restlessness but by the fact that, as an army deserter, he lives under the constant threat of discipline for the crime of refusing to

submit to a discriminatory program of domestic labor set forth for black soldiers. His refusal to accept the racialized role of building proper homes for the white soldiers permitted to act as the proper agents of the nation, ultimately, results in the nation's refusal to let him ever truly be at home again. Meanwhile, McKay's own refusal to portray a bourgeois image of home as the ideal serves as an indictment of the very continuity between regimes of respectability and racial oppression more explicitly articulated by Toomer.

Furthermore, when McKay fragments and repurposes the components of domestic schemes, he more broadly destabilizes familiar connections between practices and places. I would argue that we can see this tactic of narrative play with spatial signification as an instance of spatially-oriented modernism by which McKay defamiliarizes social conventions and structures, continually dislocating conventional values and practices from the material spaces and frameworks that, quite specifically, house them in the cultural imagination. And of course, this spatial unsettling manifests not only in the non-traditional domesticities of the freighter's culinary community, the train's kitchen clashes, and Jake's wanderings around the various semi-public domestic spaces of Harlem, but also in the text's invocation of the larger dynamics of migration that brought Jake to Harlem in the first place. At one point early in his search for Felice, as Jake has forgotten "the street and the house" where he might find her, he and his friend Zeddy move from the Baltimore saloon to the Congo, as Zeddy explains that when "the chippies come up from down home, tha's where they hangs out first. You kain always find something that New York ain't done made a fool of yet" (35). The circular energy of Jake's own search gets embedded, then, in the larger circuit of the Great Migration, the flow of fresh-faced newcomers coming to New York only to be made fools of, to have their work of arriving somehow undone and channeled into nostalgic yearnings for the places they have left.²

This sense of geo-social dislocation persists on various scales. We see it, for instance, in the naming of the Baltimore and the Congo, as Jake and Zeddy move from the space named for the more urban American locale to the one considered “a real throbbing little Africa in New York,” a place that at once invokes the idealized foreignness of Africa and the material intimacy of “the warm indigenous smells of Harlem” (30). This doubled locale houses other paradoxes and transformations as well. It processes migrating southerners on their way to becoming New Yorkers—thus manipulating the terms of oldness and newness. It also revitalizes the cultural productions uniting these populations who come together to mingle and dance while the Congo turns “old tune[s]” into things “fresh and green as grass” (36).

The tune McKay highlights in this case—a thin fictionalization of Bessie Smith’s “Foolish Man Blues”—also brings us back to how the novel’s spaces make familiar things new by dissociating social practices and features from the conventions that govern them. The Congo singer croons: “there is two things in Harlem I don’t understand/ It is a bulldycking woman and a faggoty man,” while Smith’s speaker states: “There’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I can’t understand. That’s a mannish actin’ woman and skippin’, twistin’, woman actin’ man” (Davis 280). In addition to using brasher terms, McKay distinguishes his lyric from Smith’s by linking it specifically to Harlem, where such queer identities are questioned but also permitted, as McKay shows moments earlier when Jake emphasizes the crowd’s appreciation of a “shiny coffee-colored girl...singing from table to table in a man’s bass voice” (31). As the musical expressions of both cabarets affirm the possibility of unconventional gender identities and practices, these spaces not only delimit zones of social fluidity but become emblematic of the social and physical fluidity of Harlem life overall, as well as of the artistic expression associated with it. The singer sings from table to table much as Jake lives and loves from

residence to residence and the waves of southern migrants make their homes here, there, and elsewhere as they move from “down home” to “Harlem” and beyond. All of these motions sustain the home that is Harlem, in a sense, as a space of fluid stability.

McKay’s destabilized home spaces ultimately do not even reject the bourgeois domestic ideal many of these migrants aim for so much as they figure a Harlem home *as* an ongoing series of dis- and re-locations both spatial and social. As for the scales of such relocations, Jake’s international freighter reminds readers that rural and/or Southern areas are not the only sources of Harlem’s influx. Harlem is also full of international travelers, eventually hosting, perhaps most notably, Jake’s friend and sometime co-protagonist Ray. A Haitian émigré, Ray works with Jake on the train and seems at first to model a more traditional domestic trajectory before he himself leaves the relative stability of his Harlem home to exit the novel on an international freighter as Jake entered it. As noted by various scholars, Ray’s presence infuses the text’s vectors and circulations with a sense of the transnational and even meta-textual dimensions of its questions of belonging, inclusion, and exile.

The intellectual and foreign-born Ray, not incidentally the text’s most likely figure for the author himself, amplifies the sense that the more explicitly material and emotional wanderings of the text correspond as well to a struggle for intellectual belonging. Ray himself is afire with intellectual curiosity and rage against the imperial United States. He has educated himself by way of an extensive reading list McKay provides in detail, from Dickens and Stowe to Joyce and Anderson to Dostoevsky and Chekov, and he has come to trade his devotion to the failed “constructive ideas of ultimate social righteousness” of his time (227) for his budding “dreams of making something with words” (228). In fact, he wonders if he could “create out of the fertile reality around him? Of Jake, nosing through life...” (228). Ray’s own restlessness

eventually drives him to embark on international travels again. First, though, it matches Jake's bodily wanderings to Ray's actively wondering and creative mind. In the process, it converts material Harlem into the material for a novel-in-waiting that poses art as a way to move past failed social activism. The reader begins to wonder whether she is reading that very novel, the tale of Jake's socially-charged sensual ramblings, come to fruition.

For his own part, Jake immediately takes a liking to the intellectual Ray that invokes the domestic scheme of familial ties. He nicknames Ray "in a genial, semi-paternal way," reflects on how his life "had never before touched any of the educated of the ten dark millions" (McKay 164), and eventually brings family and education together in the dream of how it might have been had his own family been educated. Then, he muses, Ray might have paired up with Jake's sister, and "we could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do" (273). Ray's mental energy changes Jake's domestic vision, bringing to it the joined forces of education and earning potential to create an imagined home that is at once a tradition model of bourgeois upward mobility and a non-traditional family unit of both heterosexual and homosocial bonds. This settling down is not to be, however, and just as Ray finds couplehood and the city smothering, Jake comes to feel that "Wese too close and thick in Harlem. Need some moh fresh air between us..." (287). Thus, along with Ray's, the novel's own interest in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and habits of Harlem wears thin. The focus tilts from Jake to the newly introduced Ray, and to privileging Ray's perspective more fully as the pair's time together goes on. And here we see perhaps another—and a more evidently formal—manifestation of McKay's play with notions of spatial experience and belonging, as the text becomes more concerned with both the place Ray occupies in the world and space he occupies on the page.

Until now, the text has indeed functioned in many ways as the tourist's guide to black high- and low-life that W.E.B. Dubois so famously denounced it as, a map of the spectacle of working class urban black life to satisfy the "prurient demands" of intrigued readers (DuBois 374). Once Jake gets tired of Harlem and gets on the train, however, the novel seems to tire of its initial object as well, playing instead with alternate characters and trajectories. It pulls the rug of Harlem out from under its readers' feet, letting them find their own way out via the Pennsylvania railroad, via Ray and Haiti, via whatever road Jake and Felice might take to Chicago. McKay's map turns out to be of something other than promised, as Shane Vogel suggests "offering instead an anticartography that works not by accurate representation but by affective resonance" (136). Essentially, as the home Jake seeks turns out to be differently located and constituted than it first seemed, the narrative itself seems left, much like Jake, to reconsider the nature of its proper home and the best route by which to attain fulfillment. It becomes clear that McKay's questions of belonging include the question of whether the text itself can belong in the cultural scene it so carefully illustrates, as many proponents of the Harlem Renaissance could not see a place for it in their project of uplift, despite Ray's narrative aspirations. For it and its author, too, Harlem offers less of a resting place than initially promised.

Buffet Flat Belonging

In a variety of ways, the disarranged domestic tropes of the novel signify a broader instability that includes patterns of social, material, geographical, and even textual circulation, revealing the plethora of ways in which the home space of Harlem may be contested. That being said, McKay does not stage these contestations only to cast readers afloat on a sea of confusions and unbelongings. Rather, the text maps and comments upon these tensions through its

portrayals of the very domestic spaces that register so much flux. The rest of this discussion will turn to a particular group of such spaces: the buffet flats which frame much of the novel's activity and which also exhibit a productive tension between domestic stability and instability, crystallizing the ways in which a pattern of a domestic stability within continual motion meets its conceptual inverse, the trope of the materially stable domestic space that transcends social limitation by dint of its ever-shifting composition and connotations.

Buffet flat parties were a fixture of 1920s Harlem nightlife, offering entertainment after-hours and as an alternative to more formal cabarets and nightclubs. They were similar to the better-known rent parties, where tenants would raise money to meet their housing costs by charging admission to their homes on a Saturday night in exchange for music, food, and drink. Both sorts of parties operated in private apartments around Harlem, but the buffet flat, according to Harlem lore, was named for the still wider, buffet-like array of pleasures it offered, from pork chops and fried fish to music and dancing to bootleg liquor, gambling, and prostitutes. As Stephen Robertson points out, these establishments were even "more widespread and more central to black nightlife" than rent parties (497). And while both phenomena re-cast private domestic sites as public and commercial sites, buffet flats were more explicitly and illicitly entrepreneurial.

This distinction distanced buffet flats from the ostensibly more wholesome domestic and community spirit suggested by rent parties. Buffet flats were in a sense still more closely aligned with the literal domestic spaces they occupied, however, in that, as Robertson and others note, they offered more privacy. While those hosting rent parties spread the word to raise profits by enticing as many eager neighborhood newcomers as possible, buffet flat proprietors advertised less freely if at all, so as to avoid getting shut down for the varied illegal amusements on offer.

Their customers found them by word of mouth, and proprietors might occasionally relocate to throw off the authorities. They were accessible only to those in the know, while others, like Jake looking for his “little lost brown,” might wander the streets all night for want of the proper address. Although these spaces seem to contradict traditional domesticity in various ways, such concerns are importantly balanced by their connotations of interiority, exclusivity, and privacy beyond even what many Harlemites could find in their own personal (and often shared) lodgings.

In fact, as various scholars have argued, buffet flats offered a range of critical privacies. To begin with, they furnished space in which to conduct personal and even sexual interactions away from people’s own over-crowded temporary living spaces, as when Jake takes Ray to a fancy Pittsburgh buffet flat both to find women and to escape the jam-packed and bedbug-infested lodgings provided by the railroad. They were also key sites for a developing African American gay subculture, offering places for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize free from both social and legal censure.³ Buffet flats also, of course, allowed people to drink freely despite the legal restrictions of Prohibition. As Kathleen Drowne contends, this activity indicates a civic and political stance often neglected in criticism of the novel. Figures such as DuBois and Kelly Miller saw flouting Prohibition as a threat to the authority of other Constitutional Amendments granting African Americans civil and voting rights, and they pressured African Americans to adhere to it on these terms (Drowne 24); Jake’s illegal drinking, on the other hand, aligns him with newer-guard black intellectuals pushing back against such pressure. Though Jake himself professes no political stance on the matter, the general acceptance and enjoyment of buffet flat drinking in the text offers a vision of black citizenship and domestic life that accommodates rather than elides a realistic array of controversial personal, cultural, political, and domestic practices.

But perhaps most importantly for McKay's purposes, the buffet flat signifies racial privacy in the contested social space of Harlem. As Langston Hughes commented, people at Harlem house parties were just trying to "find *some* place to have a drink that the [white] tourists hadn't yet discovered... to have a get-together of one's own, where you could do the black-bottom with no stranger behind you trying to do it, too" (228). Jake certainly feels this pressure, choosing often to socialize in exclusively black settings and exclaiming in surprise when he encounters whites "mixing in!" at the most exclusive buffet flat he's attended yet, that of the lovely and well-connected Madame Suarez, the inner circle of Harlem inner circles he considers it a "great feat" to "gain admission to" (104). Jake's experience at this particular party, however, takes him beyond both his delight at its exclusivity and his surprise at its diversity. For he quickly comes to see it as "the real stuff," whites or no whites, a "new world" (104) where distinctions of race, class, and nationality give way to the "graceful abandon" (105) of the party atmosphere. Further still, he figures it as "[t]hat strange un-American world where colored meets and mingles freely and naturally with whites" (106). The privacy of Madame Suarez's flat, where social and material interiority meet, then becomes the basis of an alternative national geography, at once inside and outside the nation, figured in terms of an American national frame but specifically "*un-American*" in character. The heterotopic potential of the domestic space of the buffet flat thus allows the articulation of alternate ideas of national collectivity; the apartment operates, if briefly, as a kind of shadow nation in which its own democratic ideals can in fact be realized.

This utopian un-America is tenuous, though, and soon disrupted by the actual America's actual police, white party guests who turn out to be undercover cops. Not only is the flat shut down and the party crowd arrested, but this incident heightens Harlem's tandem regulation of its

own material spaces and conceptual categories. For fear of another raid, black proprietors stop admitting white customers, thus bringing spatial and racial boundaries into alignment. Also, those McKay describes as “near-white members of the black race, whose features were unfamiliar in Harlem, had a difficult time proving their identity” (111); discipline handed down from the state triggers conceptual and literal regulation of racial identity within the black community. The stakes of access to Madame Suarez’s flat bring the stakes of access to Harlem into relief, as this incident describes a material geography of belonging in which physical spaces both reflect and construct the understanding and regulation of identity-based citizenship. This amplified regulation, furthermore, puts creative energy on the run in Harlem, and the threat of persecution here echoes the threat which exiles Jake and sets him packing for Chicago. It brings us back as well to the suggestion that Jake is not the only one for whom Harlem was becoming “too close and thick” and that McKay himself may also be pushing against Harlem’s limitations as a literary as well as material home. For McKay shows here that while we may in fact be able to build alternate collectivities through the management of material private spaces, these spaces are still unavoidably embedded in disciplinary legal and social frameworks.

Therefore, enacting this “un-American” America—this national home within which other valences of home must sooner or later interact—is and must be an ongoing project in which we strive to balance the utopian possibilities of spaces and the kinds of surveillance, regulation, and discipline that regulate them. The ultimate goal is not to reopen the buffet flat in some other apartment, but to let its illuminating potential reshape our conceptual walls, frames, and foundations. That is, McKay implies that we can attain the comforts of belonging only by remaining alert to changes in the conceptual frameworks that determine the character of material spaces. Jake signals this need for conceptual flexibility when he dismisses Ray’s comments on

racial distinction by pointing out that “There’s all kinds a difference in that theah life. Sometimes it’s the people make the difference and sometimes it’s the place” (202). Though he refers specifically to the ways in which women can be differently desirable, the notion of contingency he expresses in this moment resonates throughout the text, suggesting that one cannot simply go home or be at home because both self and sanctuary are moving targets. Sometimes the person changes while standing in place. Sometimes the place changes around him.

Soon after, Ray takes a similar position, in a sense, when he declares that black culture needs to find its own contexts and goals rather than inherit those of upwardly mobile whites. He cautions that “we get our education like—like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for” (243). Most directly, he draws attention here to the changing racial demographics of Harlem residential areas. It is notable as well, though, that he puts a concern about attachment to outdated ideas in terms of attachment to material places that sustain racial associations. This moment may constitute a specific call to the black intelligentsia to let go of “old houses”—the dead stuff of bourgeois middle-class domestic ideals—and open their minds instead to McKay’s own controversial portrayal of Harlem life and black subjectivity. It also issues a broader warning against nesting in the comfort of our entrenched private notions as we might in our houses. It also urges readers, not to mention Harlem Renaissance writers, to question the notion that Harlem could in fact give its many pilgrims the material, intellectual, and cultural solace they sought there, especially now that many whites were “mixing in” in a new way, valuing Harlem more and more as destination for racial tourism even as others moved away.

It is also no coincidence that earlier in the novel, during a painfully restless night in shabby railroad lodgings, Ray turns to what he calls “home thoughts” (152) in the hopes that

thinking of home will soothe him out of consciousness. In an effort to get some sleep, he spreads “his Negro newspapers” on his bunk to protect himself from bedbugs (144). Ray refers in this moment to the personal and national home of his youth in Haiti rather than the Harlem home that doubles as a buffet flat. This notion of the Haitian home, though, only amplifies the buffet flat’s aura of heterotopic potential. To begin with, insofar as he seeks a good night’s sleep by fashioning bed-sheets out of the print matter of current events and black cultural production, Ray signals that the most intimate details of domestic comfort are inextricably bound to broader racial and political dynamics, the same dynamics that have allowed “the richest railroad in the world” to provide its “black servitors” with such “filthy quarters” (156). Furthermore, it is striking that McKay expands the definition of “home” to refer to Haiti in particular at the same time that he highlights Ray’s notion of domestic nostalgia as a soporific. In bringing these “home thoughts” together, McKay reinforces the idea that domestic space can either be a locus of anesthetizing complacency or a dreamscape of revolutionary potential, a refuge from real-world troubles or a hotbed of imperial oppression. All of these extremes, among other possibilities, are there to choose from on the kitchen table at the buffet flat that is McKay’s Harlem. That being the case, despite its limitations, and despite, or rather perhaps because of, Jake’s ultimate decision to leave it, Harlem is a perfect figure for a philosophy of belonging based on intellectual suppleness.

For it is notable that “home thoughts” do not in fact soothe Ray to sleep. Intellectually as well as physically, the concept of home is not a resting place in the text but a launching point for questioning the nature and usefulness of “races and nations,” “language and literature,” the “steam-roller” of imperialist “progress” (155). McKay seems, here, to suggest that domestic spaces can model a new world of inclusion and equality, and that those who are flexible enough can move indefinitely from instance to instance of that manifested ideal. He also demonstrates,

however, that the real spaces of working class black life as well as the conceptual spaces of intellectual Harlem continue to be vexed enough to prevent a more stable belonging for those who would choose stability. Thus he at once asserts a philosophy of geographical and intellectual mobility and registers a protest against the systemic dynamics of race and class surveillance that so easily turn the ramblings of a freeborn man into life on the run.

Sidney Bremer argues that the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, “an extremely mobile crew” themselves, felt united by their experiences of wandering and thus developed a collective vision of Harlem as “a primary symbolic home” for “modern urban transients” (48). Considering the Harlem Renaissance a “civic as well as an aesthetic moment” (53), she notes that these writers ultimately realized both Harlem’s potential and its limitations in these terms, while Anglo-Americans did not, and while critics continue to neglect the civic dimensions of this aesthetic movement. In this text, Claude McKay engages with the cultural and material history of Harlem as a “home”—and of the home spaces of Harlem—in order to further this union of civic and aesthetic concerns. He shows both Harlem’s capacity to house wanderers and its vulnerability to civic and social forces that ultimately keep such transients moving. Above all, like one of the text’s buffet flat proprietresses, he calls the reader to “Come right in” (13) and fully engage with the challenges this novel poses. He calls us to take the time to consider what it would mean to refurnish the perhaps too comfortable houses of our minds as we try to make sense of our own homes, our own neighborhoods, the cultural traditions that express them, and a nation that is as fraught now with questions of division, inclusion, and belonging, as it was in McKay’s time.

Notes

¹ For many, the notion of black mobility itself automatically implied a sense of transgression, as many scholars have discussed. For more on how such prejudices became codified in post-bellum America, see Bryan Wagner on the criminalization of black vagrancy in “Disturbing the Peace: Black Vagrancy and the Culture of Racial Demarcation.” For more on reactions against black female mobility as morally suspect, see Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body.” For a more detailed reaction contemporary with the events of the text, see Kelly Miller, “Surplus Negro Women.”

² For more on how such migrations often resulted in disillusionment and turn, through blues expression, back towards the migrants’ places origin, see Jon Michael Spencer, “The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950.” For a discussion of other sorts of migration in the text—particularly the vector of Haitian migration represented by Ray—see John Lowney, “Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of Home to Harlem.”

³ For more on queer Harlem, see Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem” and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*.

Chapter Five

Lock and Key Blues: Mobile Domicility in the Recorded Works of Bessie Smith

"...I heartily concur with those who would argue that there is much to be celebrated in the Black American fascination with our bodies and our homes. Still, I must ask, as we approach the millennium, how much longer can this particular set of ideological and discursive strategies serve our interests, especially in the face of the constant reports of black bodies and households under siege?...What worlds will collide if black bodies continue their promiscuous, self-interested longing? What catastrophes await the erection of improper households? What more is to be achieved through this union?"

-Robert Reid-Pharr, Conjugal Union

"There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors...if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life...But the concept of being outdoors was another matter...Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor..."

-Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye

A widely-recounted anecdote of the Harlem Renaissance tells of the night Bessie Smith attended one of Carl Van Vechten's parties, sang to mixed reception from the elite crowd, and ended the evening feeling so affronted by Fania Van Vechten's parting kiss that she threw the hostess to the floor, famously shouting, "I ain't never *heard* of such shit!" (Albertson, *Bessie* 174). Following the incident, Carl Van Vechten helped Smith's friends escort her out of the apartment, offering the apparently sincere comment that she'd been "magnificent." This incident may well be apocryphal. Nevertheless, in this moment and its subsequent and persistent narration, we see the race, class, and gender tensions of the cultural moment flaring at the intersection of 1920s literary and musical culture. To begin with, as this conflict erupts out of a musical performance, it suggests the importance of sound—and of blues music specifically—as a framework for literary culture. Notable as well is this incident's location, an ambiguously domestic space in which the dynamics of publicity and intimacy clash when the black blues woman's voice and body enter this primarily white, intimate space, permeating not only Van Vechten's material home but the interiority and exclusivity associated with his place in the social and literary inner circles of the Harlem Renaissance. Smith herself, meanwhile, not only

amplifies her own iconicity but catalyzes a domestic disruption that registers the social tensions permeating private domestic life and public literary culture in early 20th-century America. Indeed, this incident signals the degree to which the female blues tradition, and Bessie Smith in particular, disrupts the notion of the domestic itself, calling into question early 20th-century understandings of the spatial and racial dimensions of a normative American idea of home. In this chapter, I argue that a closer investigation of that disruption not only allows an updated understanding of Smith's significance but reveals the ways in which her artistic work, her domestic practices, and the dissemination of her music provide a model for thinking through changing ideas of domesticity and belonging in the American cultural imagination, amidst the shifting technological and social conditions of the early 20th century.

In the 1980s and 90s, critics such as Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and Daphne Duval Harrison re-claimed the blues women as early articulators of a black feminist consciousness. This critical work importantly counteracted the previous neglect of female blues artists, not only recognizing their general significance and artistry but asserting the subversive power of their aesthetic, their message, and their lifestyles, in that they privileged their own desire and liberation—often in the form of geographical mobility—over the oppression and spatial containment of traditional female roles. In the decades following this influential work, and despite recent calls to examine the soundscapes that frame and permeate American literature, scholarship has not yet updated critical understandings of the blueswomen to account for more recent work by feminist geographers among others on the gendered politics of mobility. That is, while I agree with the ultimate implications of claims made by Davis and others, I assert that they are based on a limited and problematic equation of mobility and liberation.

This chapter argues that the blues women are indeed as significant as earlier critics

claimed, but for different reasons: not their rejection of the domestic but their refiguring of its possible definitions, not their insistence on mobility, but their dissolution of the dichotomy of sessile, carceral domesticity vs. liberating, transgressive mobility. Using the prominent and prolific Bessie Smith as a point of focus, I argue that if we consider the racial and spatial soundscapes of the early 20th century, we can see that the blues woman makes her mark by privileging agency and self-definition over either mobility or domesticity, and further, by denaturalizing the supposed boundary between the private/domestic and public/mobile self, and by extension, between what we commonly understand as the private and public spheres more generally. These implications, evident in the body of Smith's recorded work, are also extended and reinforced both by Smith's own domestic practices and by the dissemination of her work through developing sound technologies.

To see the full significance of Smith's particular domesticity, it is useful to consider more closely the ways in which blues women have generally been understood. In light of the difficulty in assimilating them into traditional notions of femininity, and despite—or perhaps in part because of—their tremendous popularity, the blues women were largely dismissed as vulgar entertainers by their cultural contemporaries, the critics and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Privileging male artists, later critics have explored the significance of blues music in articulating a developing post-Emancipation African American consciousness. Still, it has only been much more recently that female blues singers have begun to receive the critical attention their work deserves. As Davis and others have demonstrated, the blues women of the 1920s not only belong to the rich tradition of American blues music in general but also, in their recordings and performances, express a specifically female and even feminist African American consciousness that must be examined in its own right.

Such assessments of this body of work and its implications have persuasively established the figure of the blues woman as embodying freedom, independence, and transgression. As this scholarship suggests, a vital feature of this figure is her mobility. In addition to her freedom to move in a literal, geographical sense, she is understood to represent the freedom to circulate in other ways as well, thus suggesting not only geographical but also, for instance, sexual and economic independence.¹ In this regard, the blues woman also crystallizes a broader sense of moral panic surrounding the “movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities” in the early 20th century and the accompanying fear of such women’s sexuality (Carby 739).² Furthermore, the notion of the blues woman as a fundamentally mobile figure often rests on the idea that her mobility is defined largely by her removal from the traditional domestic sphere and in particular the obligations of marriage and motherhood, whether in response to specific calls for racial uplift or the more general reign of bourgeois middle-class values.³ As Davis puts it, both in regards to their sexual autonomy and more generally, “[t]he female figures evoked in women’s blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed” (13). It is perhaps equally important to note the other type of domesticity that so often limited female autonomy in the classic blues women’s time, i.e. that of professional domestic labor.⁴ The potential hazards of both domesticities aside, it is worth noting in itself the sense of confinement produced by societal insistence on these paths as being the only ones available to the many African American women moving into Northern and/or urban centers in and around the 1920s.⁵ Both contemporary and later critical responses to the blues women rest on defining their mobility directly against such confinement as represented by either traditional notions of private domesticity or the drudgery of professional domestic work.

Thus, they figure the blues woman's anti-domestic mobility as essential to her liberated and librist status. This kind of formulation poses domesticity as a restraining condition and domestic space as a kind of carceral space, transgression defined by escape from it.

While the work of critics such as Davis and Duval-Harrison has been essential in drawing attention to the real significance of the blues women's work in these terms, I would like to build on that work by bringing it into conversation with more current conceptions of mobility, which have complicated the idea that geographical movement is both physically and ideologically freeing. A full appreciation of the blues women's cultural significance must account for these more recent understandings of mobility and its relation to other factors such as race, gender, and citizenship. Carole Boyce Davies suggests that the "struggle" for agency in women's blues is "consistently expressed in rejection of current conditions, physical and emotional movement, assertiveness and a variety of migrations 'elsewhere'" (134). While this is often the case, Smith resists the absolute location of a politicized agency "elsewhere," and instead also highlights the material domestic as a realm where multi-faceted agency is possible. Indeed, she figures both the "elsewhere" of mobility and the "here" of domesticity often opposed to it as proper sites for sexual, racial, and economic power negotiations that may affirm black female agency.

Davis rightly notes that geographical and sexual mobility were particularly significant in constituting a "blues consciousness" because of their relation to the history of slavery, within which the proscription of travel and the prescription of sexuality were two defining constraints (8).⁶ Of course, posing mobility against slavery also highlights its potential for supporting civic and economic liberation. As various critics note, however, movement can also express or exacerbate disenfranchisement. As Smith's imagination of "home" and "elsewhere" suggests, the home is not inherently devoid of sexuality or agency, nor is it economically or civically static.

She indicates that although it can oppress in a variety of ways, it is sometimes possible—and necessary—to reject current conditions not by leaving, but by staying on the scene.

At the same time, Smith's media presence raises further questions about mobility by complicating what it means, even, to be in one place or another, not to mention questions of how the disembodied mobile voice or persona participates in the politics of the spaces it enters, domestic or otherwise. Above all, Smith's rich conception of and interaction with domestic spaces urges us to rethink critical categories within her time and our own. (Or as she herself might say on the subject, "You been a good ole wagon, honey, but you done broke down.") Further, through her own domestic practices and the reach of her vocal presence into the domestic spaces of many others, she becomes emblematic of the ways in which sound and mobility technologies unsettled notions of spatial and racial belonging in the early 20th century, pointing ultimately towards media representation as a form of political representation.

Home in the Blues

The classic blues women, Smith included, do indeed express a desire for mobility and realize that desire in both life and lyric, and prevailing views of their mobility align with a critical strain that sees the mobile subject as uniquely able to navigate and complicate established schemes of power. Critics such as Kathy Ferguson and Rosi Braidotti, for example, suggest that mobile subjects and subjectivities destabilize the boundaries of individual identity and may achieve an empowered state of continual motion and adaptability appropriate to the postmodern condition. Such notions provide a framework for understanding both Smith's importance to considerations of race consciousness in the blues and her demonstrated capacity to evade and challenge the many social prejudices she faced. Other scholars, however, have insisted on the

many ways in which people may have uneven access to and experiences of mobility, or the ways in which mobility may reflect conditions of coercion, homelessness, imperial privilege or lack thereof. Marangoly George suggests, for instance, that the very discourse of mobility reinforces the imperialist connotations it carries. And, as Pritchard points out, “mobility, per se, is a wholly inadequate index of freedom and development” (57).⁷ Overall, the notion of mobility as automatically liberating elides an array of social dynamics that may just as easily render movement as dislocation or coercion.⁸ Thus, while Braidotti, for instance, advocates a model of agency based on nomadism, others point out that the actual conditions of nomadism, migration, and exile associate mobility instead with the attenuation or outright denial of rights, and that the forms of mobility that may be truly liberating are accessed and experienced quite differently by different people depending on social, economic and political conditions.

In regards to the sort of mobility many early blues women experienced, we can see elements of both liberation and containment at play. Many female blues artists, for example, traveled the proscribed paths of the management circuits that determined touring schedules. As Harrison describes in her influential study of the 1920s blues women, *Black Pearls*, many prominent blues women, including Bessie Smith, rose to fame through their work for the Theatre Owners’ Booking Association (TOBA), a management organization that booked black acts along its busy circuit of venues ranging throughout the northeastern, southeastern, midwestern, and southern regions. While this organization was vital to securing the livelihoods of many performers, it also had no shortage of drawbacks, as Harrison herself points out. Its headliners fared somewhat better, but TOBA “treated everyone below top billing poorly, subjecting performers to low”—or never delivered—“salaries,⁹ inadequate or no housing accommodations, cramped and makeshift dressing areas, poor lighting and staging, cheating managers, racist

managers, haphazard schedules, abandonment and so on,” as well as “long ‘jumps,’ that is, a few nights in one town then the ride hundreds of miles away for another engagement” (Harrison 24). Furthermore, this particular brand of mobility went beyond removing performers from traditional domesticity to in fact often denying them any sufficient shelter at all. Performers sometimes ended up sleeping “under hazardous circumstances; sometimes in empty buildings, in train stations, or in warehouses” (Harrison 25), as many small towns provided no accommodations for black visitors. Indeed, the organization was colloquially known as “Tough On Black Asses” for its fair share of reasons.

For all that this organization did to revolutionize the lives of its performers, it did so in a manner that often exploited them and proscribed their movements in both temporal and spatial ways, as they moved through the circuit according to the schedule laid out for them. These blues women were indeed mobile, but their mobility was dictated largely by the booking organization upon which they depended for their livelihood, and often in ways that caused them a great deal of hardship. To some extent, these are merely the basic and ongoing conditions of life in the performing arts and still allow for a great deal of autonomy. Still, discussions of blues women’s actual and ideological mobility obscure the degree to which these situations recapitulated, if on a different scale, the confining or exploitative conditions their mobility is supposed to forestall. These complications, furthermore, illustrate exactly the sort of challenge critics have posed to ideas of mobility as essentially liberating.

It is no wonder, then, that blues women should insist not only on “migrations ‘elsewhere’” but on stillness, on fixed-ness, on home. This insistence on finding, maintaining, and controlling access to home spaces creates in itself a sense of domesticity, and the contours of that re-figured domesticity are particularly clear in the work of Bessie Smith, whose transgressive

potency lies not in her escape from the domestic but rather in her insistence on setting the terms of circulation in such a way as to undermine the traditional dichotomy of domesticity and mobility and their implied value assignments. A number of Bessie Smith's recorded songs¹⁰ express a sense of frustration with continued mobility. Smith's lyrics abound with statements of desire for an end to travel, either for its own sake or in order to get to a real or imagined home. The blues "Long Old Road" (Davis 308), for example, expresses a general sense of mobility as problematic in itself. It expresses, primarily, the desire to simply get to the end of traveling, either to find the comfort of a personal connection:

It's a long old road, but I'm gonna find the end

It's a long old road, but I'm gonna find the end

And when I get there I'm gonna shake hands with a friend

or out of the sheer need to stop moving:

Picked up my bag, baby, and I tried again

Picked up my bag, baby, and I tried again

I got to make it, I've got to find the end

This song describes the general exhaustion and sorrow of prolonged travel, creating overall a sense of ongoing geographical circulation as hard, sad, and wearying. Even in the midst of other songs which celebrate mobility, the occasion of such a piece insists that mobility may also constitute a state of emotional and physical exhaustion that operates as a sort of confinement from which one hopes to be released by somehow getting to the end of the journey.

Other songs focus more specifically on directing that journey toward a remembered home. The singer of "Moonshine Blues," for instance, demands: "Stop that train, so I can go back home again," later declaring, "I'm going home, going to settle down/Going to stop my

runnin' around" (Davis 315). Though one might wonder just whom she is trying to convince, the speaker nonetheless expresses in these lines a longing for home and for deliverance from her continued movement. The "Louisiana Low Down Blues" expresses a similar desire to gear one's travel towards home and rest in lines such as, "I'm gonna keep on walkin' 'til I get in my own backyard" and "Gon'to keep on trampin', gon' keep on trampin' 'til I get on solid ground/Gonna keep on trampin' til I get on solid ground" (Davis 309).¹¹ Homeless Blues, too, affirms the importance of a specific originary domestic space in its lament for a home lost to the flooding of the Mississippi: "I'm homeless, homeless, yes, might as well be dead" (Davis 289). This piece further valorizes the traditional family connotations of the domestic in lamenting as well the loss of the mother and father who drowned in the flood. Such a sentiment is echoed, more cheerfully, in the "Dixie Flyer Blues" description of traveling to get back home specifically to one's mother: "Goin' to my mammy way down in Dixieland" (Davis 273).¹²

As powerful as these longings for a remembered home are, it is more significant still that many songs suggest a different sort of relationship to home. The weariness of travel and the reference to a former domestic stability in these pieces suggest a passive dynamic of loss and memory. Other songs, however, express a similar set of desires for sessility and home that create instead a powerful sense of agency. These songs suggest a stability located in the future rather than a remembered past, thus separating the desire for domestic stability from the complicated dynamics of nostalgia. They create this different dynamic by focusing not on loss and memory but rather on the procurement of a home of one's own.

Often, references to a longed-for home work in the spiritual idiom, signifying not so much the literal, material space of a house but the more intangible, transcending notion of a heavenly home and the refuge it suggests from all the world's trials. While that trope may be

frequently and earnestly deployed, songs referencing homeownership put a new spin on it, re-directing attention to the fact that one of the specific trials of the world for early 20th-century African Americans was the difficulty of accessing affordable, comfortable, material shelter in *this* life. A difficulty, notably, that has persisted for various reasons, including discriminatory housing and lending policies that have often put home ownership out of reach for a disproportionate number of black Americans (Jewell 87).¹³ At the same time Bessie Smith was rising to fame, the National Urban League was forming largely in order to help weary African American migrants find work and housing. For many blues listeners also taking part in the Great Migration, finding a place to live at the end of a long journey was a very literal goal. Even without direct reference to northern and/or urban housing options for travelers, Smith's references to literal, material ownership or comfortable occupation of quality housing forges a bond between the broader trope of home as comfort and more earthly domestic material needs.

One song in which Smith draws attention to the dream of property, for instance, is "Florida Bound Blues" (Davis 278), in which the speaker looks forward to part-ownership of her own domestic residence: "I got a letter from my daddy, he bought me a sweet piece of land...he bought me a small piece of ground" (Davis 279). Though the speaker's ownership of said land is not independent, its significance lies in the general assertion of a desire to obtain and live on one's own land. Claim-staking comes up as well in "Work House Blues" (Davis 352), with its evocative declaration, "I'm goin' to the Nation, goin' to the territor'/Say I'm bound for the Nation, bound for the territor'" (Davis 353). In his work of the related name, "Going to the Territory," Ralph Ellison states that Smith

gave voice to this knowledge [of the freedom represented by the North or the West] when she sang of 'Goin' to the Nation, Going to the Terr'tor',"

and it is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography. For the slaves had learned through the repetition of group experience that freedom was to be attained through geographical movement, and that freedom required one to risk his life against the unknown. And geography as a symbol of the unknown included not only places, but conditions relating to their racially defined status and the complex mystery of a society from which they'd been excluded. (131)

Indeed, this song exemplifies the importance of what Ellison calls “geographical movement” in demonstrating the larger cultural and historical significance of mobility in blues songs. Even so, I would assert that in the American imagination, the invocation of going to the frontier carries with it the invocation of settlement. One goes to the territory, generally, to claim one's own piece of it. And further, one must note that although he speaks to the opposite side of this coin, Ellison's comment also contains a reminder that movement itself, insofar as it represents freedom in regards to slavery, also represents threat.¹⁴ For, until the slave reaches a geographical and temporal location in which his freedom is secured, any attempt to reach that location generally also involves the geographical movement of a pack of vicious dogs and slave-hunters in hot pursuit. Thus, the freedom to move about in the context of slavery means little if one does not also have the freedom to stop moving, to settle down somewhere, without being hunted, captured, and returned to another location.¹⁵

Therefore, keeping this historical framework in mind, it is useful to note that “Work House Blues”—which Ellison demonstrates to be an effective emblem of the blues woman's physical and ideological freedom through mobility—contains as well a forceful statement of

desire for sessility, for the opportunity to have a safe, comfortable space of one's own and to share it with others, though notably without those others having to be one's own offspring. As Smith sings:

Say, I wished I had me a heaven of my own

Say, I wished I had a heaven of my own

I'd give all those poor girls a long old happy home (Davis 353)

The singer even unhappily notes that while doing the proscribed work house labor, she cannot do her own. She laments, "I can't plow, I can't cook," suggesting the speaker does not wish to be removed from all domestic tasks but rather wishes to be able to set the terms and directly reap the benefits of her own labor. Ultimately, while this song does also mention the need to "get the next train home" (Davis 353), and does express the sense of mobility that Ellison describes, it also incorporates a desire for a stable domestic space that then shifts the emphasis to a sense of ownership and agency rather than either just movement or just stasis.

This complex attitude toward domestic work signals Smith's broader tendency to highlight the *interrelation* of desires and concerns that shape domestic life rather than evacuate it of any reference to emotional, material, and physical needs unmentionable in orthodox domesticity. As in the other works discussed in this study, her insistence on domestic variation signifies even more powerfully against broader cultural drives to standardize the material and conceptual American home. Her recorded work deploys that more variable domesticity by regularly bringing together multiple references to geographical, sexual, and economic autonomy in the same songs in which she represents desire for or maintenance of a stable domestic space. As important as each of these types of references is in its own right, it is yet more important that Smith conflates them. By suggesting there is nothing inherently contradictory about these

concerns, she shifts focus from questions of location and labor—of either the maternal or professional sort—to questions of access and independence.

For instance, consider songs Smith performs in which the speaker not only asserts a claim on her own domestic space but also insists, when confronted with trouble, on being the one who has the right to remain where she is while the one who causes her trouble must leave instead. In “Worn Out Papa,” for example, the singer informs her lover, “You ain’t no good so you better haul your freight.” She seems to claim for herself a position of stable, located authority over both her “worn out papa” and the baggage he carries, claiming that authority *by* forcing mobility on him. She further insists, “Your youth done failed, all you pep’s done gone/Pick up that suitcase, man, and travel on” (Davis 353). As significant as it is for a woman to assert her right to travel on, should she choose to, it is equally significant for her to maintain her option to stand still, presumably in her own home, and rather to force the offending party to leave her alone.

It is also significant that in this moment she identifies female sexual satisfaction as a required element of successful domestic life, in that part of the problem with her man is his loss of “pep.” Such a notion is also echoed in the song “Put It Right Here,” when the speaker asserts that her man will have to “find another place for to park his old hips” if he doesn’t start to carry his own financial weight, as she is “tired of buying pork chops to grease his fat lips” (Davis 328). Sexuality is by no means evacuated from the domestic space of “Worn Out Papa” but is in fact vital to it. Furthermore, by combining erotic imagery with food imagery, as blues music often does,¹⁶ she codes domestic labor alongside sexuality, commerce, and economic exchange, thus further figuring domestic space as the normal, necessary location of varied power negotiations—sexual, economic, or otherwise. “Put It Right Here,” meanwhile, not only unflinchingly evaluates sexual fulfillment as a factor in successful domestic life but evokes a domestic space in which

one must weigh the more conventionally valorized stability of partnership against the hardship of gendered economic exploitation, singing, “He never brought me a lousy dime, and put it in my hand/So there’ll be some changes from now on, accordin’ to my plan” (Davis 328). Not to mention that she has also declared a moratorium on the purchasing of any further pork chops.

In “Sam Jones Blues” (Davis 333), the economic dimensions of domestic agency come across even more forcefully, as this song also articulates the speaker’s specific right to stay where she is not in a general sense that involves domestic imagery but in an explicit claim on a domestic space, the home in which she lives and over which she explicitly asserts ownership: “’Was a time you could have walked right in and called this place your home sweet home/ But now it’s all mine for all time, I’m free and livin’ all alone.” She further emphasizes her domestic independence in economic terms, insisting, “Don’t need your clothes, don’t need your rent, don’t need your ones and twos/ Though I ain’t rich, I know my stitch, I earns my struttin’ shoes.” This song does important work in both its speaker’s explicit insistence on the right to maintain her own domestic space, should she choose, and in its insistence on the idea of a valid domestic space that is defined by economic independence rather than, for example, the presence of children or the structure of a traditional marriage.¹⁷ Furthermore, in stating that her choice to remain in her domestic space also means that the offending former partner may not enter said space, this song explicitly raises the issue of access that lies at the heart of any understanding of the importance of either mobility or domesticity in these works.

This matter of access is particularly salient in the song “Lock and Key” (Davis 306), in which the singer states:

When I get home I’m gonna change my lock and key

When you get home you’ll find an awful change in me

If I don't change my mind, another thing you will find
That your baby maybe has got another baby on the Pullman line
You did your stuff, so get yourself another home
I said it long enough, so pack your little trunk and roam...
'Cause when I get home I'm gonna change my lock and key
When you get home you'll find a place where home used to be...
You cheated on me, and that's the thing that made me sore
I'll change that key, or get myself another door...

The speaker asserts her right to set the terms of access to the interior space of her domicile. In the tradition of double entendre so prominent in blues lyrics,¹⁸ this discussion of access may well apply at the more fundamental structural level of her body as well, thus intertwining the stakes of sexuality and domestic ownership. She returns again and again to a refrain describing the situation in terms of interiority and exteriority as the singer repeatedly asserts, that “[h]e must get it, bring it and put it right here/Or else he’s gonna keep it out there.” The issue is the man’s financial contribution, as the singer will not continue to provide her partner with her domestic services only to be exploited in return. In this case, she seems to be in an empowered position. The focus on material access, however, reveals further stakes of the domestic power negotiations, hinting at the capacity of material domestic space to serve as anything from fortress of self-protection to a crucible of intimate violation, depending on factors such as one’s own degree of economic security or physical strength. The ultimate effect is one that complicates any traditional sense of the domestic, not only problematizing any notion of mobility and domesticity as forming a stable dichotomy but particularly highlighting the difficulty of locating in either state a simplified stance of propriety or transgression, or for that matter vulnerability or safety, or

containment or liberation.

Blues Train

The interplay between forms of domestic freedom and constraint in Smith's lyrics comes into still clearer focus, I would argue, when we consider how she managed these dynamics in her own domestic practices. Whether regarding the general problematics of ceaseless travel or the particular problematics of how TOBA organized that travel for her, Smith notably took matters of both performance and domesticity into her own hands. That is, once she could support such a move, she diverted more of her effort to the tent show in which she worked with her brother, "Bessie Smith's Harlem Frolics," which operated outside the TOBA circuit. Alongside this new show, which began in the summer of 1925, there came another important development. At this point, Smith began to tour in "her very own railroad car, custom-built by the Southern Iron and Equipment Company" (Albertson, "Recordings" 23). In the Bessie Smith mythology, this railroad car is a palace on wheels, sporting two stories, multiple rooms, and an array of domestic comforts, including a kitchen in which Smith sometimes cooked for her entourage.¹⁹

Smith's personal railroad car distills the relationship between mobility and domesticity in her own life, modeling her multi-faceted lyrical domesticity by allowing her to set the terms of her own geographical, economic, professional, and sexual circulation to a large extent, and by allowing her to integrate traditional and non-traditional realizations of domesticity. To begin with, the mobile domestic space of Smith's train car sustained not only a sexualized but queer domesticity.²⁰ Despite Smith's ongoing marriage to Jack Gee, she regularly had other male and female partners when he wasn't with her on the road, thus indicating her capacity to accrue alternate realizations of domestic life to herself rather than simply enact one or the other.²¹ The

train car facilitated her variable domesticity in a variety of other ways as well. In it, Smith provided a comfortable domestic space for her entourage and perhaps even cooked for them at times. She did so, however, without being a mother or a professional domestic servant. She made a home on the road. She maintained that home through her own economic viability. Her work remained tied to her home, but without her labor being professional domestic labor. Smith clearly relished traveling and exercising independence that her fame and lifestyle afforded. Nonetheless, even she opted, when possible, to remove herself from the confines of TOBA-style touring in favor of this train car, which allowed her to maintain a mobile lifestyle without making it an anti-domestic one.

In order to understand how her integration of mobile and domestic spaces signifies in a broader context, it is useful to examine the private railroad car's place on the spectrum of domesticized vehicles proliferating in early 20th-century America. Smith was by no means the first to own a private railcar, nor could hers have matched the ultra-luxurious private cars wealthier figures had acquired and made liberal use of over the previous decades. These sorts of cars, belonging to the likes of figures from J.P. Morgan and W.R. Hearst to P.T. Barnum and Florenz Ziegfeld, as well as an array of lesser-known wealthy travelers, were custom-designed "mansions on wheels." Train historian Lucius Beebe explains that "[a]n inventory over the years of private cars would disclose such items of operational and decorative economy as French chefs, Italian marble bathtubs and wash stands, deep freezers, wood burning fireplaces, antique Venetian mirrors, English butlers, crystal chandeliers, hidden jewel safes..." and even solid gold plumbing (Beebe 18). Beebe notes that these luxury train cars, though potentially less costly than their owners' other material excesses, were seen as the height of prestige and indulgence. Further considerations of these cars suggest among other things their associations with notions of race

and class purity as the preferred vehicles of moneyed northeasterners who ventured West in them to “try to find and regenerate the nation’s Anglo-Saxon heritage” (Nugent). The privately-owned luxury railroad car of the Gilded Age through the 1920s connotes, then, not only ample space, basic domestic comfort, and the convenience of taking home on tour, but what Beebe calls “exalted status in the general fancy” (10), a status including racialized implications of wealth, social standing, and genealogy.

Smith’s car likely closer resembled the more standard railway cars rented by touring minstrel shows and other performers. W.C. Handy and the Mehara Minstrels, for instance, toured in such a train car. According to Handy’s account, this car was not cooed over by admiring bystanders but rather shot at by devoted white supremacists when the train sped through their town. Its version of the tycoon’s concealed jewel safe was a compartment for hiding food, guns, and the occasional persecuted performer (White 41). Still, though Smith’s car, too, was a more practically-designed vehicle—and similarly used to help manage the racial dynamics of life on tour—we cannot overlook the ways in which it signifies success and even extravagance within the scheme of her own social and financial circumstances. It was large enough, for instance, to transport the long center pole and canvas for her tent shows, and it was outfitted well enough to accommodate forty people in domestic comfort (Albertson, “Bessie Smith” 83). It may even have conferred a degree of racial empowerment if we take Patrick Field’s suggestion that it was Smith’s awareness of having her own railroad getaway car that allowed her, in legendary fashion, to run off a KKK threat during one of her tent shows (60).

Overall, the fact of the railroad car being privately-owned and custom-built indicates a high degree of independence, status, and star power. Smith and her entourage gladly took advantage of the opportunities that status afforded her, using the train car not only to avoid the

difficulty of finding accommodation in the Jim Crow south, but to do so in considerable style. At one point Smith was so “eager to use her railroad car again,” as Albertson relates, that she broke her regular touring routine to instead do a series of tent shows that would allow her to return to life on the customized railroad car (Albertson, “Recordings” 27). That is, once she had the wherewithal to do so, Smith seems to have privileged life in this private, mobile yet domestic space over other options, treating it as her own sort of mansion on wheels, the lack of solid-gold plumbing notwithstanding.²² And indeed, the lack of such features did not prevent the train car from accruing to itself some of the social connotations of its more extravagant counterparts.

That being said, in light of its suggestive combination of indulgence and status with practicality and a marginalized social position, Smith’s railroad car perhaps aligns at least as closely with the domesticized auto-car as with the luxury private railroad car. More broadly, the train car integrates the privileged agency of independent motion and the staging of a more sessile domestic comfort and stability. In this regard, we can see Smith’s arrangements as emblematic of a much broader trend in early twentieth-century American approaches to mobility and domesticity toward technologies that could integrate the two conditions. And in particular, we can see her own approach as both responding to and offering a model for dealing with the racial dynamics of that promising but problematic union of mobile and domestic space.

Smith’s railroad car domesticity distills, in a sense, a transition that was occurring in understandings of mobility and domesticity in the 1910s and 20s, as trains were coming to be seen as old-fashioned while access to automobiles increased and, in turn, automobile designers responded to increased desire for comfort and style on the road. As Karl Raitz points out, Ford quickly had to replace the open Model T with the enclosed Model A to remain competitive as others began to produce enclosed sedans “that offered homelike comfort and protection from the

elements” (375-6). While cars themselves were becoming more “homelike,” other designers actually created homes on wheels in the form of the auto-camper, which allowed drivers to attach to their vehicles a trailer that could support many of the domestic comforts and practices of the home space. Pioneered, as it were, by the 1929 “Covered Wagon,” these auto-campers began to be mass-marketed in the late 20s and would surge in popularity over the coming years, eventually developing into the modern-day RV and mobile home as we know them, whether to be used for traveling or in fact—particularly as the Great Depression rendered many unable to afford or maintain more traditional houses—as stationary, semi- or entirely permanent homes. For our purposes, the important point is that as Smith was singing about and modeling the possible interrelations of mobility and domesticity, American automotive culture was also exploring the technological and ideological possibilities of bringing home on the road.

As Deborah Clarke points out, the tension between mobility and domesticity, and more importantly still, the increasing imbrication of the two, alerts us to the interaction of mobility technologies with understandings of gender and civic identity. Clarke poses the notion of the “automotive citizen” to demonstrate how the agency associated with driving is in many ways the agency of the recognized, participating citizen. Tracing the development of automotive subjectivity and citizenship from the emergence of the mass-marketed automobile in the early 20th century,²³ she shows how the car registered and influenced gender relations, offering women independent movement between what is often considered the private, intimate, spatially fixed domestic sphere and the public sphere of market, commerce, and politics. She suggests that in changing the possibilities for women’s physical place in society, access to automotive culture also unsettled ideological determinations of women’s social place in society. This process not only re-confirms the permeability of public and private spheres but represents a literal, material

transformation in how these ‘spheres’ could be understood or regulated in early 20th-century American culture, particularly in regards to gender.

Other critics, such as Paul Gilroy and Cotton Seiler, foreground the racial politics of citizenship and mobility, or what Seiler calls the “‘republic of drivers’—a political imaginary of anonymity and autonomy that finds expression in the practices and landscapes of automobility. The rhetoric of this republic holds that the driver enters the stream, as the citizen enters the public sphere, as a blank figure, divested of her particularities, and thereby empowered to speak, act, and move” (1092). The developing culture of automobility offered an important site for working through raced and gendered dynamics of citizenship, as well as providing a new way to mediate between individual and group identities. That is, cars may work as registers and instruments of civic identification, allowing greater agency through the fact of being able to move oneself around, to move between private and public spaces, and to merge with the vehicle, as it were, in order to attain a kind of anonymity while on the road.²⁴

Keeping in mind the material, geo-spatial valences of such movement into or through the public sphere, it is also useful to consider a little more closely what that public space signifies. In considering Smith’s public engagement, I draw on Mary Ryan’s conception of the public sphere as a feminist re-framing of the essentially Habermasian public, in which she acknowledges the interpenetration of “private” and “public” realms but still distinguishes between the different degrees of direct political action generally implied by each. Ryan notes that while an earlier, classically-based notion of the public “validated spaces and political practices that foster exchange of opinion between citizens” but masked its limited definition of whom those citizens could be, “[f]eminist political theorists push at the boundaries of the public by holding that sphere to the highest standards of openness, accessibility, tolerance of diversity, and capacity to

acknowledge the needs of a heterogeneous membership” (Ryan 12). While Habermas stressed the public sphere’s “capacity to bring citizens together to . . . reach a consensus about the general good” (Ryan 11), Ryan notes that “[u]nrestrained public discussion with the intent of arriving at common goals could not be sustained once workers and the propertyless (not to speak of women)”—or, it goes without saying, freed slaves and their descendants—“demanded entry into its august halls” (13). In considering the significance of Smith and her recordings, I think of something more like Ryan’s “public,” which describes material and discursive spaces in which opinions ““about matters of general interest”” (Habermas, qtd. in Ryan 11) may be debated and developed, in theory by *anyone*, with or without reaching consensus. In this sense, it is perhaps the public sphere of Honig’s “dilemmatic democracy”—in which not consensus but disagreement would in fact more reliably register a democratic discourse. Even so, and perhaps above all, it still aligns with Habermas’s ““realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”” (qtd. in Ryan 11) and which “mediates between society and the state” (Ryan 11).²⁵

While this notion of the public provides a basis for considering the civic dimensions of Smith’s own automotive—or railcar—citizenship, it does not override the ways in which identity markers such as race, gender, and class frame different people’s relation to that public sphere. Ryan examines these discrepancies in depth, illustrating the ways in which society figured poor, working-class and particularly non-white women in public in the 19th century as “dangerous”—sexually promiscuous, potentially violent, and generally threatening to the social order—while middle- and upper-class white women were the “endangered” to be protected from such threats, their own public presence meanwhile connoting anything from sociality to civic engagement (94).²⁶ This contradiction also has to do with perceptions of vagrancy, which scholars such as

Linda Kerber and Bryan Wagner have demonstrated was “used capriciously” in postbellum America “to assure cheap labor supply or to control the most impoverished” (Kerber xxiii).²⁷ Kerber points out that for both male and female African Americans, “the legacy of slavery,” among other factors, “create[d] a heightened obligation to appear to be working, a special vulnerability to punishment as vagrants *even when* they were working, even when they appeared to be law-abiding” (55).²⁸ By contrast, while upper-class white men’s presence in public does not necessarily indicate civic activity of any kind, their freedom to be either publicly mobile or idle without censure does register a fuller realization of citizenship.²⁹

These dynamics show individual public mobility—and society’s response to it—to be always indexical, in a sense, of civic positioning. They show that while specific engagements with public space or discourse may not be explicit or even intentional exercises of citizenship, they will nonetheless register one’s civic position and thus always, in a sense, carry civic implications of some kind, whether registering, reinforcing, or disrupting the social order that reflects the nation’s uneven treatment of its theoretically equal members. These, then, are the stakes of Smith’s public engagement, whether by vehicular movement into and through public spaces, by performance in the public arena, or by media recording or broadcast into varied spaces throughout the nation. To some extent, we might expect that her public presence would only register her social marginalization, and to some extent, it did. However, the agentive stance she takes in both life and lyric toward public opinion and authority, combined with her stardom, also amplifies her impact on mainstream culture.

Consider, for instance, when her implied speaker in “Young Woman’s Blues” says she’s got “No time to marry, no time to settle down/I’m a young woman and ain’t done runnin’ ‘round” (Davis 356). Or when this speaker asserts her desire to drink, ramble, maintain the vague

menace of her mysterious persona, run down her share of men, and revel in her blackness, all of which intentions would reinforce her marginalization in a cultural scheme penalizing black women for such behavior—indeed, a cultural scheme that penalized black women *by* assuming such intentions. And then consider her assertion, in that same song, that she is nonetheless “good as any woman in your town.” By making this claim, she not only radically disputes the link between conventional domestic femininity and female cultural value, but by explicitly asserting the value of her re-figured, public, mobile, sexual, dangerous, racially empowered domesticity, she also troubles a broader racial and spatial order that uses such links to maintain a disenfranchising social hierarchy. In a sense, as feminists push on the Habermasian public sphere to demand greater inclusiveness, Smith—by shamelessly, emphatically, and publicly valorizing her marginalized subjectivity—opposes the social exclusions the public sphere often amplifies rather than dissolves. Moving into the realm of public opinion, she emphatically makes her own opinions public, troubling the social order by refusing its valuation of her. In this regard, we might even see her pre-figuring what Ryan calls the “private-interest” politics of 20th-century democracy, which may risk a loss of broader perspective but nonetheless represent an important “expansion of the public sphere” through the “empowerment of marginal groups” (169).

Keeping these stakes in mind, let us consider more closely the nature of her material engagement with public space by way of her personal train car, which shapes her own access to public spaces and also models the empowering mobilization of a marginal subject across a broader geography of racial belonging and representation. I would argue that Smith’s train car, while distinct from an auto-car in many ways, can be understood in schemes such as Clarke’s “automotive citizenship” and Seiler’s “republic of drivers.” It resonates most explicitly with the auto-camper’s promise of self-sufficiency for the traveler of average means, and like the auto-

camper, it offered some measure of independence from the racial dynamics of travel. Smith's sister-in-law, for instance, highlighted the interrelation of these issues by saying in regards to the private train car: "Everybody was so excited....And what a difference it made—some of the towns we hit didn't have hotels for us, so we used to have to spread out, one staying here, another one there. Now we could just live on the train" (Albertson, "Recordings" 23). This comment refers to the same racialized space Raitz describes as the developing world of roadside accommodations in the 1920s. As he notes, many appreciated the independence provided by the well-outfitted touring auto, but there was a greater need for this feature among African American travelers, who faced the myriad dangers of racism, not to mention the particularly difficult logistics of lodging. Raitz relates one African American woman's description of her family's car as a "'self-sufficient capsule'—an automobile containing maps, food, and even water for the radiator," a self-sufficiency necessary because "the personal freedom to engage the roadside via automobile did not apply to African Americans, and perhaps other minorities, in parts of the nation whether North or South" (378). The camper, of course, provided even more autonomy than the well-stocked touring auto, facilitating sleeping, cooking, and many other comforts and practices associated with domestic life. Like the "family car" or auto-camper, Smith's railroad car enhanced both individuality and domestic community, providing a significant degree of self-sufficiency as well as the opportunity to maintain a group of loved ones together in home-like comfort while traveling.

While the autonomy of Smith's railroad car was limited, being hitched to a train outside her control, it nevertheless aligned her in many ways with the auto-tourist due to the autonomy she gained, professionally and personally, by touring in her own train car rather than directly on public transportation, or in an automobile whose every move must be dictated by T.O.B.A.'s

performance schedule. At a more basic level, it can be seen to facilitate the sort of access to different social and geographical spaces—and particularly the option to move between what are generally understood as private and public spaces—that characterizes Clarke’s notion of ‘automotive citizenship.’ For Smith and her entourage, moving between private and public spaces meant moving through racialized space and constantly navigating degrees of racism associated with different locations, resting places, and modes of travel. Smith’s use of the train car as a kind of racially-insulated—as well as generally self-sufficient—capsule not only demonstrates a powerful response to the racial politics of life on the road but demonstrates the degree to which Smith’s response places her in the avant-garde of mid-1920s mobile domesticity, her roving railroad home exceeding the domestic offerings of the standard auto-car and prefiguring the meeting of notions of individualization, mobility, self-sufficiency, and domesticity that would soon reach the mass-market by way of the auto-camper.

In a sense, the train car also situates Smith within Seiler’s ‘republic of drivers’ in that it highlights the tension between the ostensible (and, at times, real) benefits of agency and anonymity and the profound attenuations thereof which mobility technologies may offer. For, as Seiler, Clarke, and Gilroy, among others, note, cars only go so far in enhancing agency, both in cultural representations and in real life. As Seiler argues, “the space of the American road, like the contours of citizenship, was established under specific regimes of racialized inequality and limited access whose codes it reproduces” (1093). He directs us as well to the commentary of Michael Warner and others on the “self-abstraction of the citizen” that occurs in the rhetoric of automotive or more general mobility as empowerment which “disembodied political agency while at the same time making clear that only those with specific types of bodies could assume it” (Seiler 1092). That is, the agency promoted by vehicular mobility may often be undermined

by the degree to which actual embodied mobility—and associated cultures and infrastructures surrounding or facilitating it—also re-inscribe the social hierarchies they supposedly negate.

In addition to the issue of this sham agency, embodied mobility poses a variety of dangers, both in lived experience and in cultural representation. Clarke notes, for instance, that while black involvement in automotive culture “derailed the association between whiteness, progress, and technology that so many saw embodied in the automobile” (66), African American literature highlights the dangers as well as the promises of automotive agency for black subjects. For authors such as Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, for instance, “[t]he car may provide...figurative power, but it cannot change the material conditions of...life” and may even lead straight to death (68). And indeed, Bessie Smith herself died as the result of a car accident, an occurrence which was quite real but subsequently fictionalized. This event added to the Smith mythology the tenacious idea that her death in fact resulted from a tragic combination of race politics and mobility technology.³⁰ As the rumor goes, Smith was taken to a white hospital after the accident but refused life-saving treatment on racial grounds.³¹ Albertson’s 1972 biography discredits the idea that race was a factor.³² However, it is telling that in both the Smith mythology and literary representation of her death,³³ this incident of fatal mobility is persistently read as demonstrating the dangerously racialized dimensions of mobility, posing the agency of such movement as overwhelmingly subject to the racial power schemes in which it is imbedded.

In his 1947 essay “Freight,” Langston Hughes offers a searing critique of this expression of white supremacy. He laments Smith alongside other black victims of car wrecks known to have died under such circumstances, suggesting that perhaps the white hospital staff “consider injured Negroes freight—freight too lacking in value, too cheap to live....Bessie Smith, deep-throated singer of American songs, freight! Dying freight, denied opiates, comfort, treatment,

healing, or even an easy death. On the Southern roads, injured Negroes are less than freight” (Hughes 60). For Hughes, Smith’s mobility is not only fatally beholden to Jim Crow politics, but exposed as an illusion masking the opposite condition. He expresses this ultimate attenuation of Smith’s agency as the transformation of the mobile subject into the transported object. Not driver or even passenger but less than “inanimate perishable freight from an overturned truck” (60), the black mobile subject is stripped of the agency associated with movement; Hughes reminds readers instead of the forced mobilization of the slaves who “were brought to this country as freight chained in the holds of slave ships” (58). However Smith herself may figure mobility, she becomes for others a symbol not only of its catastrophic possibilities, but of the ways in which its paradoxical blend of possibility and threat—its manifestation of the discrepancy between a theoretically democratizing advance and its uneven practice—re-inscribes the racial hypocrisies of American history.

Her becoming a focus for such concerns seems at first somewhat ironic, for Smith’s work does not primarily or explicitly caution *against* mobility. Rather, her work suggests precisely what Elizabeth A. Pritchard argues about the equation of mobility with female (or any) liberation: that it is not that mobility makes subjects able to freely move along axes of power but rather that “the discourse of mobility is itself an axis of power” (53). Smith’s life and work frame domestic space as a similarly neutral index (and potential incubator) of agency. That is, I situate Smith with these discussions of automobility not because she, too, sang about the dangers of driving, or even did the driving herself, but because both her work and her domestic arrangements clearly register mobile domesticity’s capacity to mediate the private (domestic) and public (mobile) self. She reminds us, as does Hughes, that mobility can wrench people from their homes as well as offer a mode of escape or self-realization. And by imbricating rather than

opposing domesticity and mobility—by living a domecility that does the same—she reveals the degree to which, by acknowledging the *intersections* of more and less conventionally domestic elements of home life, we may open up new possibilities for figuring the private-domestic self *as* the public-civic self.

St. Louis Blues and Singing Across Spheres

By dissolving this dichotomy, Smith not only makes the home—indeed the very concept of the domestic—mobile, but she makes the domestic subject also the mobile and thus in many ways public subject. She essentially re-figures the domestic itself, combining it with an idea of mobility that facilitates participation in the public sphere, while hinting at elements of civic personhood, often imagined to be absent from the (imagined) female domestic sphere, as integral to home life. And further still, as the rest of this chapter will argue, Smith not only suggests that we can and must refigure our construction of the domestic, but she and her recorded works enact this charge by projecting her iconically transgressive, black proto-feminist presence into domestic spaces around the nation through the medium of sound. That is, Smith not only conveys a message that forces us to rethink our spatial and social categories but gets involved in other people's social spaces in a way that does in a sense re-constitute those spaces. As her involvement in the public and domestic soundscapes of 1920s and 30s America reveals, the technological reproduction and distribution of her voice adds new dimensions to the question of how race and space could be figured during the time of her stardom and beyond.

The rest of this discussion will turn towards the ways in which Smith's media involvement—her performances, radio and film presence, recordings, and broadcasts—enacts in a broader cultural sense the complex domecility she sang and lived. To some extent, the effects I

discuss below could be discussed in relation to any early 20th-century radio or recording star. Smith makes a particularly poignant example, however, because her own lyrical deconstruction of the mobility-domesticity dichotomy emblemizes the very process of media technology bringing artists' presence across vast geographical distances, often directly into people's homes, complicating what it means to be mobile or sessile, to be in one place or another, to inhabit a private space or a public space. In a sense, media works as a conceptual version of the auto that makes Clarke's automotive citizenship. It moves not Smith's body but her voice and persona into different material and discursive spaces than she could otherwise enter. Like her train car, sound technology transports her (recorded or broadcasted) voiced subjectivity into "the stream," as Seiler puts it, still *with* rather than "divested of her particularities," not "blank" but disembodied, "and thereby empowered to speak" (1092) in locations she couldn't otherwise access. This process also potentially puts her voice into conversation, in a sense, with the thoughts and discourse happening in those spaces.

Many early proponents of radio saw great democratic potential in its capacity to represent anyone's voice in a broader aural community. Over time, people considered it less so as networks upped their cultural curation and took greater control over programming through the 1920s and 30s. Not "just anyone" could get on the radio anymore, though those who could might reach broader audiences as radio became a nationalized forum. In any case, however limited its democratic effects might have been in practice, each instance of communication and representation makes a difference by bringing the represented voice into the realm of public "sense-making" and opinion formation, as Peter Dahlgren suggests. Though he specifically discusses the role of television in relationship to the public sphere and citizenship, Dahlgren's thoughts apply to early radio as well when he notes that even if media consumption

is a totally individual affair, the experiences gained from viewing are carried over into social interaction....Thus, while most viewing still takes place in the home, which is traditionally seen as a private space, this domestic site of ‘mediated public-ness’ is where talking about public matters may begin...” (18)

Dahlgren stresses here media’s potential—from within the material space of the home—to trigger broader social and even civic participation as “reception is often a first step of interaction” in public discourse, “which in turn shape[s] a sense of belonging and a capacity for participation in society” (18). Though he also stresses the limits of media’s influence on the public sphere, he contends that “in acting as citizens, people do not necessarily leave behind all the sense-making they have done as audiences” (122), thus suggesting that media provides a pathway between the displayed content (including subjectivities or stances thereby conveyed), public discourse, and civic action. With this pathway in mind, I turn to another aspect of Bessie Smith’s media presence. As demonstrated above, her domestic practices and tropes model the interrelation of home and mobility, and thus in a sense of private and public spaces. Let us now consider how media technology further expresses and conceptually enacts that interrelation not only through her more extensive radio and recording activities but through her one foray into film, the 1929 film short *St. Louis Blues*, which dramatizes her popular song of the same name.

St. Louis Blues, which features Smith as a spurned lover, articulates the interrelation of private and public space visually as well as aurally. The romantic drama begins in her boarding house, moving from the semi-public space of the hallway where her lover Jimmy and others shoot craps and carouse, to her private room, where she soon discovers Jimmy two-timing her. Domestic space frames the personal power struggle that ensues, not insulating the players from outside concerns but rather connecting them to the politics of racial and financial interaction.

Before Smith arrives, the janitor invokes a white overseeing power when he attempts to break up the dice game by noting that “that white man is paying me to keep this here place clean” and the rounders are in his way. Still, while the absent white landlord signifies an encompassing hierarchy, the caretaker’s material presence authorizes him within the moment, as suggested when he halts the game by exclaiming, “Do you know who I am? I am the *janitor* here at this place, that’s what I am!” While the janitor locates authority in domestic activity and ownership, Jimmy vexes it by bringing financial exploitation into the conversation when he plays on the janitor’s comment about keeping the place clean by replying, “Looks like you tryin’ to clean *me*” (*St. Louis Blues*). Not only is authority then located at a nexus of domestic activity and economic exchange, but domestic labor and financial exploitation are conflated here into the word “clean.” This alignment both emphasizes the economic valences of domestic practice and sets the stage for the multi-valenced betrayal that is about to occur within the more intimate domestic space of Bessie’s boarding room.

For shortly thereafter, that betrayal initiates the aural and visual yoking of the private and public to each other, as conducted by Smith’s voice. Jimmy and his girl leave the dice game to canoodle in the bedroom. The girl’s question of “What would you do now if Bessie walked in here?”—echoing the janitor’s earlier “Do you know who I am?”—reminds viewers of an absent authority whose power is put into question by the proceedings. Jimmy shrugs off his lover’s concern, further revealing the dynamics of financial exchange coded into domestic space by replying, “This is *my* room, Bessie just paid for it.” The men gathered outside, however, repeatedly refer to it as “Bessie’s room,” and Smith does indeed arrive moments later, asserting herself as owner and gatekeeper of the space when the girl tries to leave and Smith remarks that “You got to see me before you go,” calling her a “little wretch” for “coming in my room,”

wrestling her to the bed, and beating her (*St. Louis Blues*).

Just as an unauthorized entrance into domestic space crystallizes the broader domestic betrayal, this domestic scuffle signals the broad array of elements composing the film's presentation of domesticity when it summons the janitor back into the fray. Though his authority has trumped that of both the dice-players and the landlord, in a sense, Smith now bests them all by dismissing his attempts to rout her. He once again invokes the layers of domestic power and ownership by asserting his regulating status as janitor, thus arrogating the power of the white landlord to himself in asserting authority over Smith's private domestic life. Smith replies, however, "I don't care who you is, I don't care if you're the landlord, you ain't got nothing to do with my business." She dismisses his threat of eviction, ultimately, with the shout, "Don't I pay my rent?"³⁶ This response highlights the agency potentially associated with private living space, implying that she can do whatever she wants there as long as she holds up her end of the contract by paying rent. Still, we are reminded that anything that does go on within that "private" space is embedded in the fraught politics of tenancy, as she asserts her own agency by dismissing the janitor, and through him, the authority of the white landlord himself.

Having fully proven her authority, however, she then cedes it to her lover, begging him not to leave her from where she lies on the floor, and in the process, suggesting that private domestic relations still shape the sort of power she has just claimed over the racialized regulating forces of the janitor and landlord. This tense interplay of private and public authority then comes to a head in the conflation of these spheres through the visual fade her singing triggers. By the end of the first rhyming couplet of "St. Louis Blues," "My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea," the scene has faded to black and re-opened in a crowded dance hall. Notably, it is the word "in" that is sustained over the fade, emphasizing the mediation of internal and external

even as the mechanisms of media technology transport the singer from the internal, private space of the bedroom to the world outside, the public space of the dance hall, where the rest of the film will play out. As it continues, the private space of the boarding room morphs into the private attitude of the singer, whom we see from the side and from a distance while she sings into her drink. Not only does she not address the audience, but the camera angle and her own persistent internal focus seem to make the viewing audience voyeurs. Smith, meanwhile, even seems unaware of the supporting vocals of the crowd at the dance hall, as though her voice interacts with theirs incidentally, or as though their singing is only a further manifestation of her own thoughts. These impressions are enhanced by the fact that the dance hall patrons, who begin by humming, barely move their mouths and give no facial signals as they sing, even when their voices swell to operatic proportions. Their voices seem to emanate from the ether of the public space itself as much as from Smith's inner thoughts and affect. Thus a blurring of personal interiority and exteriority extends that of the private/domestic and the public enacted when Smith's voice bridges the spaces of the boarding room and the dance hall. This blurring suggests as well that the vocals and the filmic fade only reinforce the co-existence of the private and public already in effect. The public had been present in the 'privacy' of Smith's bedroom all along, as her most private moments have been open to the public realm of not only the dance hall but the theater where the film is shown.

This vocal blues performance, then, stages a continuity between the private and the public, exposing both the expressive redemption that continuity may allow and the intimate vulnerability that public spaces and subjectivities often obscure. In doing so, it challenges the artificial separation of private and public spheres or selves, and the sorts of activities that define a proper domestic subjectivity. Further still, it challenges the race, class, and gender zoning of

both private and public spaces, in that the media object of the film has a life beyond the segregated spaces in which it was first shown. In this case, the public media audience takes part in constituting the private domestic space of Smith's persona in "St. Louis Blues," while her domestic subjectivity pervades the public space of the featured dance hall and the actual theater that shows the film. This interchange illustrates the permeation of racialized private and public zones; while it may have taken some time for the film to reach white audiences, its being ultimately portable and reproducible sets the stage for conceptual exchange as the film can, in a sense, bring diverse audiences into Smith's private space and bring her subjective stance into the diverse public realm of "sense-making" and public discourse. That public discourse, meanwhile, as Dahlgren suggests, often begins with media interface in the private, material space of the home. Media then can bring Smith, in some sense—might somehow aesthetically transubstantiate her, we might say?—directly into the domestic spaces of her listeners, whatever their own race or class positions might be, just as it brings her across the border from her "private" boarding room into the "public" dance hall. In that regard, even if for just the moment, it reconfigures the racial zoning of the socio-spatial order.

Blues in the Home

As for the potential of that reconfiguration, the film's distribution of Smith's persona crystallizes the still more extensive reach of her presence in the cultural imagination through the popularity of her sound recordings, which appealed across racial lines. Sound technology carried her persona from the implied intimacy of her domestically-inflected subject matter, into the public realm of the music business, and through to the private, domestic spaces of listeners, white as well as black, thus potentially changing, in a sense, the racial composition of such

spaces. That is, sound broadcasting and recordings brought black voices into white-dominated spaces in a new way, thus opening up new possibilities for inter-racial exchange and understanding. Smith's work, of course, was not unique in being carried by such technology, but her popularity, coinciding as it did with the explosion in media technologies in the 1920s, makes her an ideal example to consider. Her particular brand of domesticity makes her a more appropriate case still, as she suggested in both life and lyric the importance of reconsidering what and whom we can incorporate into our private spaces, and into our notion of home. While Smith's music conceptually re-draws the lines of the domestic, its media distribution models that renovation, whether regarding the practices that constitute it or the racial relations coded into it.

That being said, the film "St. Louis Blues" signals the degree to which access to the public sphere, and with it civic selfhood, may be nonetheless undercut from the start by the segregation of that public sphere. In the exchange between the domestic space represented on screen and in the material public space of the theater, we see the capacity of media to bridge social distances, but also the ways in which it newly manifests existing social hierarchies and dynamics. The film integrates Smith's private singing with a public community of sympathetic voices and, potentially, a broader public of sympathetic listeners. Insofar as it might bring her voice to an unbounded American public of listeners, we must note that the capacity of media technology to bridge varied communities—much like the capacity of mobility technology—is subject to social conditions. "St. Louis Blues," for instance, not only portrays exclusively the racially divided spaces of the boarding house and the dance hall but was released only in black theaters (Albertson, "Bessie Smith" 87). Her records, meanwhile, were most popular among black listeners.³⁷ While these facts in no way diminishes the significance of the film or any of her other work, they do draw attention to the social demarcations of the public sphere and the

implications thereof. Thus, while media technology allowed Smith to reach a theoretically unlimited public, race and gender politics complicate her reception and thus the reach and possible applications of the kind of domesticity she promulgated.

These limitations become even clearer when we consider the particulars of how sound technology would bring Smith's and other blues women's voices to a listening public, a process which reveals such technology's negative as well as positive potential.³⁸ On the radio as well as in film, the less progressive possibilities for racial representation are clear. William Barlow, for instance, points out that much popular music in the Jazz Age "was rooted in jazz and/or blues....However, the singers who achieved stardom on radio in the 1920s were predominately white interpreters of black song," while African American "luminaries" such as Bessie Smith "were only occasionally heard on radio, if at all" (326). Smith did indeed get radio play, including a live broadcast William Randle cites as giving a sense of black radio performances during the 1920s and representing the "cluster of 'black' hit songs on radio" that existed along with those by white performers (72). Still, despite her radio presence and general popularity—most extensively though by no means exclusively among black listeners—the recorded and broadcasted material of Smith and other blues musicians was largely subsumed into the racial politics of the developing radio networks throughout the 1920s and 30s, signaling appropriation as much as rapprochement.

As networks gained control over independent broadcasting, the community-building, broadly representational potential of radio continued to give way to network agendas of mediating between racially-charged ideas of high and low culture. As cultural historian Michele Hilmes points out, "Broadcasting...became a key element in the ordering of the American cultural hierarchy. Early regulatory decisions attempted to mark radio out as a controlled and

sanctioned space in which the ‘vulgar,’ such as black jazz performers or race records, could find only a tenuous and sanitized foothold” (186). There was also a notable lack of a black radio presence in the form of any “higher” art, much less political or cultural commentary, that would not have been considered “vulgar.” As Sarah Wilson puts it, despite the success of radio programming in the 1920s and 30s being largely due to the popularity of jazz programming and thus of African American music traditions more generally, “African American ‘voice’ was insistently cast as musical and theatrical production” (273). As many note, the democratic potential of radio was thus in many ways, nearly from its inception, compromised by the same prejudices that permeated the rest of the American culture listening in.

Despite the modern connotations of the radio, these conditions, in a sense, carry certain trends over from the racialized soundscapes of 19th-century America, which Mark Smith describes as being integral to white Southern post-bellum nostalgia for the imagined harmony, as it were, of plantation life.³⁹ As slaveholders fundamentally “understood that sounds were markers of gender, race, class, and virtue” (Smith 28), the sounds associated with slave labor—from the noise of spinning wheels and looms to the actual singing of slaves engaged in all kinds of work—“were inextricable from the plantation landscapes because, slaveholders fancied, slaves acted at the behest of a master/maestro who conducted his plantation like a well-governed orchestra” (Smith 24). Mark Smith demonstrates here a tradition of understanding and perpetuating racialized power schemes by managing the racially-coded domestic soundscape. While sound technology, then, may have bridged various spatial and social boundaries, the notion of the plantation soundscape reminds us that the mere presence of black voices within white homes does not, on its own, signify a redistribution of agency. Insofar as the empowered subjectivity of a Bessie Smith could, via radio or phonograph, enact a kind of representation in

the theoretically democratic space of the public sphere, the racial politics of radio broadcasting and even “race records” marketing replay in many ways the dynamics of the “master/maestro” who conducts the sounds of his space in order to reflect and reify white supremacy.

And indeed, the technology of reception complicates things further in that the very technology that facilitates the mobility of Smith’s voice—and thus the reach of her significance as a model of material, domestic, social, and civic mobility—also facilitates the disembodiment of that voice. Tim Armstrong outlines this sort of process in his study *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, which explores, among other things, the implications of developing sound and film technology in the cultural imagination of the early 20th century. In particular, he argues that the transition from silent to sound films created anxiety about the possible mismatching of sounds and bodies that such technology facilitated. That potential mismatching, in fact, takes place in a process called “goat-glanding,” the addition of sound—including voices—to previously filmed but not yet released movies.⁴⁰ Both the rhetoric and the practice connote “the uncertainty of relations between bodies and voices,” as dubbing scandals revealed the possibility that “the voice attached to a body might be another’s” (Armstrong 224). And this uncertainty had racial valences as well, as black bodies and voices became more prevalent in films along with the notion that black voices recorded better than white. As Armstrong figures it, “Here the black body is inserted—goat-glanded in, one might say—as a source of vigour at the moment of suture, of an experimental uncertainty in which the African American signals orality itself, the ‘natural’ voice” (225). And of course, the possibility of dubbing allows for the insertion of the black voice with or without the black body, and thus for the appropriation of whatever is desired of the black voice—be it “vigour,” authenticity, or particular vocal tones—without the necessity of representing the black person who has produced it.

This sort of dynamic is at least as evident in the disembodied technologies of radio and recording. The widespread popularity of blues and jazz music confirms the white dominant culture's appreciation of African American expressive traditions, but in a sense, the disembodiment inherent to radio and recordings only facilitates white consumption of black voices—and whatever thoughts or sentiments those voices express—without any need to fully encounter, much less grant agency to, black bodies or subjectivities. Bessie Smith's vocal persona may enter where her person may not. We are left, then, with the question of just how much Smith's (or any other) voice can complicate the racial and spatial boundaries of the domestic as understood by her contemporaries. One useful way to answer it is by viewing Smith, often called the "Empress of the Blues," through Lauren Berlant's notion of "diva citizenship."

"Empress" Citizenship

Berlant uses the term "diva citizenship" to describe "moment[s] of emergence that mark[] unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity" (223). Her specific examples include a series of African American women, from Harriet Jacobs to Anita Hill, who have broken conventional decorum to publicly protest violations they suffered in order to call attention to systematic injustices and oppressions such incidents reveal. Berlant explains,

Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation; *as though recording an estranging voice-over to a film we have all already seen*, she renarrates the dominant history as one that the abjected people have once lived sotto voce, but no more; and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has

narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent.”

(223, emphasis mine)

Smith differs from this in some critical ways. Her works do not publicize violation against her so much as express the real and imagined sorrows and joys of a collection of implied speakers, some of whom may correspond with her as an individual, as penned by various composers. Above all, her work lies outside Berlant’s model in that her blues expression is intended as entertainment, not protest. Most importantly, she makes no claims about setting out to call on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship.

For all that, however, the “Empress of the Blues” performs “diva citizenship” in a number of striking ways that do ultimately call on listeners to change the social practices of citizenship, particularly in light of the fact that Berlant allows for subtler forms. Her notion grows out of a suggestion that, in light of the ways sexual threat and exploitation have worked to control populations and regulate the social order, we consider sexual power as a national politics of oppression. Berlant draws particular attention to the use of this power against African American women, hence her choice of figures such as Jacobs and Hill to illustrate the forms diva citizenship may take. Regardless of the details of her own experience, Smith falls into the category of women whose subjection to such threats puts her within Berlant’s configuration of subaltern subjects, and as Smith’s popularity and critical reception has shown, many consider her to speak for African American women’s experience more broadly. Furthermore, as she voices many imagined subjects in her songs, she represents a black female collective of sorts, and a collective whose concerns about sexual agency are front and center in much of her music. As an icon of black, feminist, queer sexuality, Smith enters the fray, complicating conventional views

of race and sexual exploitation in the cultural imagination, just as she complicates the cultural reception of black female bodies moving through public spaces. Berlant also sees something like diva citizenship in the “everyday forms of assertive and contesting speech” observed by bell hooks among “southern black folk” (223), speech that relates closely to blues expression.

Smith aligns with the model more directly as well, however. She certainly stages a bit of a “coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege” by inserting African American experience and subjectivity into the dominant cultural narratives coalescing in early radio. We could see her rise to stardom, coinciding with the rise of radio and mass-production technologies that could further circulate her recordings and image, as “flashing up and startling the public” with her own talent, which helped to fuel the broader obsession with African American cultural production represented by the blues and jazz craze of the 1920s. She too uses “publicity” to draw a disproportionate amount of attention to smaller acts of cultural disruption (*Queen of America* 223). Smith may not speak out in response to a “personal emergency” comparable to those of Jacobs or Hill,⁴¹ but if we see her—as part of the blues tradition more broadly—as responding to the related ongoing state of emergency of racial inequality in early 20th-century American culture, Smith’s work does stand out as “challeng[ing] her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce,” a challenge that invokes as well the “social and institutional practices of citizenship” that had shaped slavery not too long before Smith’s rise and its harsh legacy in her own time. Indeed, the blues as a whole could be described in these terms.

Perhaps most striking of all, though, is the way in which Smith aligns with Berlant’s description of “put[ting] the dominant story into suspended animation; as though recording an estranging voice-over to a film we have all already seen, she renarrates the dominant history as

one that the abjected people have once lived *sotto voce*, but no more” (223). Berlant describes, in a sense, a conceptual instance of goat-glanding which empowers rather than appropriates the voice of the “abjected” speaker. Smith projects her estranging voice-over of American experience, redirecting attention and affect to the experiences of people abjected by the social and civic hierarchy. She makes no explicit political protest—indeed, Langston Hughes reports that when he questioned her about the larger significance of her music, “her only comment on the art of the Blues was that they had put her ‘in de money’” (Miller 57). However, in “diva citizenship” form, she disrupts the dominant narrative by publicizing her raced, gendered, classed subjectivity. She does it by foregrounding the very social markings Mary Ryan describes as determining whether society sees women’s engagement with public space as idle vagrancy versus civic participation. As Berlant acknowledges, such moments should not be confused with “sustained social change itself,” but the projection of Smith’s voice into the public sphere of sense-making and beyond into the private spaces of varied listeners works as a form of diva citizenship to unsettle the expressive continuum of the dominant social order, reminding listeners of the degree to which the ideal republic of equal representation in fact unevenly weights its citizens’ voices. “*Sotto voce* no more,” indeed.

Particularly in light of her own meditations on literal and conceptual mobility and domesticity, it remains to consider how Smith’s impact actually works—how media technologies transport her estranging voice-overs of dominant cultural narratives into the private households and public forums of the nation, whatever their social or racial composition. To what extent can the material and social particulars of the performing body find representative force through the medium of sound, thus complicating the social boundaries of the politically-charged domestic spaces of the nation as Smith’s lyrics complicate the concept of the domestic itself?

As the rest of this discussion will suggest, in ways both ephemeral and effective, her media representation works to reconstitute the aural composition of the private-public realms of media reception and sense-making. Through these technologies, in both their intangible and material capacities, her voice enters varied homes throughout the nation, among other spaces, and thereby enacts the destabilized and destabilizing domesticity her music expresses.

Radio Intimacy: Out of the Victrola, Into the Parlor

Some degree of Smith's effectiveness lies in the materiality of the medium itself, the notion of the radio⁴² as simultaneous vehicle for the sound of a voice such as Smith's and constitutive physical element of the intimate space of the home. For in the joining of these things, we can see how, despite the ways in which the existing social order attenuates the effects of Smith's work, the combined materiality and intimacy implied by the radio embody the potential of sound technology to enact exactly the sort of domestic re-configuration Smith represents. That is, in a sense, we can see aural domesticity and mobility as similarly aligned rather than opposed, as the soundscape of the American home is at once constituted by the sounds that exist in the stable space of the home and the sounds that constantly stage movement between—and thus the permeation of—the private and public by bringing news and cultural performance from the outside world into that intimate space and, in turn, incorporating the private individual into cultural frameworks.⁴³

As radios became more popular and available, in fact, one of the key issues for owners was that of how to integrate this unfamiliar technology, and the unfamiliarity it transmitted, into the comfort and privacy of the domestic space. Radio “linked the purchaser into a network of communication that could be both comforting and disturbing, but in either case brought a distinct

and other reality into listeners' homes," thus creating a "dilemma" that could be solved in part by "put[ting] the radio into a cabinet which harmonized with the domestic furnishings" (Silverstone and Hadden 48).⁴⁴ The idea of the cabinet itself "harmonizing" with the rest of the space is particularly poignant, as it expresses the material dimensions of the domestic soundscape as well as the degree to which metaphors of aurality may frame the social experience of domestic space.

While Silverstone and Haddon emphasize users' responses to the "'monstrous unreality'" (48, qtd. in Silverstone and Haddon) of the new technology itself, Steve Wurtzler highlights the perceived threat of the urban and modern culture that technology transmitted. While radio innovators stressed the technology's potential to express a kind of "musical democracy" and bring the benefits of cultural centers to those at the geographical periphery, they also strived to reassure purchasers that radio, like phonographs, could "make the middle-class parlor a 'safe' site for consumption of the best of urban culture" (Wurtzler 146). Here we see another valence of the concern over how to integrate modernity itself with "traditional domestic values," as Wurtzler describes how companies such as RCA and Edison marketed the radio in the image of the phonograph in order to perpetuate "preexisting constructions of domestic space as a safe haven from the modern world" (146). Comfortable consumption of the radio and its implications had to be facilitated by both material and conceptual reinforcement of the domestic status quo.

Insofar as this tension registers consumers' desire to at once connect with and insulate themselves from "perceived urban dangers" (Wurtzler 146), it also encompasses white listeners' desire to consume and enjoy, from a safe distance, the popular and often transgressive music of figures such as Bessie Smith and other black musicians associated with the shifting racial constitution of American urban culture. While Smith is of course not unique in vocally inhabiting varied American homes in this way, her popularity in many ways represents both the

geographical mobility and the flourishing African American cultural production associated with the Great Migration. In a sense, new sound technologies goat-glanded the sounds of such African American cultural production not only onto the silver screen, but into the sound and space of the normative white American home, thus changing the constitution of such domestic soundscapes. The presence of such sound technologies in the material space of the home paved the way, furthermore, for a new kind of representation of “othered” voices within the intimate construct of the American family and household, a construct that has long been understood to both signify and operate as a sort of microcosm for the nation itself. And the popularity of a figure such as Smith, both in her own historical moment and beyond, shows the capacity of this aural representation in domestic soundscapes to facilitate a tremendous cultural legacy, notwithstanding the mediation of the technology’s disembodying effects or of broadcasting networks “edifying” their audiences by minimizing transmission of “lowbrow” and “race” music.

Indeed, though its marketing aimed to curtail the “otherness” the radio brought into the normative white American home by integrating it into the material-aural structure of the domestic space, I would argue that this move in fact results in much the opposite effect intended, creating instead a dynamic that not only expresses sound technology’s incisive power but also manifests the domestic reconfiguration Smith emblemizes. Intended to distance the listener from whatever “disturbing” elements the radio may conduct, its material integration into the domestic furniture in fact facilitates a profound intimacy between listener and performer, collapsing not only geographical but mental distance. As Smith’s voice enters listeners’ homes, it projects her own sort of domesticity from the privacy of her domestic constructions and practices, through the public sphere of broadcasting and performance, and across racial lines into the private spaces of varied listeners, becoming integrated with not only the material elements of the house—the

furniture of the parlor—but with its less tangible constitutive elements—the thoughts of the domestic subject him or herself. A voice such as Smith’s—whose tremendous popularity increased the chances of her being heard even through what we might think of as the “white noise” of racist radio programming—could thus take part in expanding the sense of what voices and implied subjectivities could constitute the sounds and spaces of the American home.

As for how this expansion worked, it is a matter of what we might think of as aural intimacy. Many have discussed radio’s capacity to elide geographical and cultural distance.⁴⁵ Regarding blues performance specifically, Joel Dinerstein describes this sort of technological intimacy in terms of the “techno-dialogic,” or “how the presence (or ‘voice’) of machinery became integral to the cultural production of African American storytellers, dancers, blues singers, and jazz musicians” (126). This notion encompasses, on the one hand, the trend of musicians and dancers incorporating the “sounds, rhythms, and aesthetics of machines in a live performance,” and on the other, ways in which performers self-consciously reference the technology that brings their performance to distant audiences (Dinerstein 127).

For instance, Bessie Smith reveals the centrality of technology to our intimate lives and thought patterns when, in the blues “You’ve Been a Good Ole Wagon,” she prefers the “automobile” of her new man to the broken-down “wagon,” for as Dinerstein notes, this comparison “calls attention to the dialogue between personal and technological change” (127). Meanwhile, Smith’s mentor and fellow classic blues woman Ma Rainey expresses the reverse dynamic in her performance device of beginning her stage show by stepping out of an enormous victrola. Dinerstein argues that the purpose of this gesture was to remind audiences that “technology was simply a tool which collapses distance,” while the live performance re-establishes the “ethnic and experiential bonds” between the performer and her community base

(129). It also creates a sense of shared domestic experience in that it figures Rainey as living not only in *a* Victrola, but in *the* Victrola, and thus, in a sense, in any home that owned one. Smith similarly highlighted technology's connective capacity in her 1922 New Orleans performances, for which her stage set was that of an old-time recording studio. As one of her drummers later recalled, she would explain the recording process to the audience, and then sing them songs she had recorded or intended to record.⁴⁶ For Rainey and Smith, the technology becomes, in a sense, the sort of "prosthetic" Tim Armstrong discusses as being central to the development of modernism, enhancing the performing body's connection with other listening bodies when distance makes a more direct connection impossible. During the 1923 radio performance Randle describes, for instance, Smith was able, in a sense, to technologically extend both her voice and her ears a little more fully into the home spaces of listeners, ultimately repeating a song in her set because of the number of listeners who called or telegraphed in to request it. For all the impersonality, and partiality of radio broadcasting, it also allowed a degree of direct interaction—a sense and some reality of closeness—between the individual at home and the radio persona on the air.

The key issue here is that sound technology destabilizes the sense of both aural and physical distance in ways that could potentially bring out its comforting as well as its distressing valences. On the one hand, Smith and Rainey dramatize the technological framework in order to privilege the still greater intimacy of live performance before an audience sharing some degree of their ethnicity and experience. Presumably, many black listeners—be it Rainey, Smith, or anyone else they heard singing out of their living room furniture—mutually valued this sense of aural closeness as well as the social bonds it invoked. It is worth considering as well, though, the effects for listeners who did not share the "ethnic and experiential bonds" Dinerstein describes,

and who may have felt threatened, intrigued, or both, by the possibility of their radios or phonographs bringing them into such an expressive community. Or, for that matter, the possibility of that technology bringing the singer, in some sense, directly into their homes. For these listeners, sound technology would have produced similar effects but with more conflicted implications.

Such implications stem, primarily, from the particular sense of intimacy produced by this technology, an intimacy commented on with some fervor by Theodor Adorno a few years further into the development of radio. While he primarily discusses broadcasts of quite a different character, Adorno's concern about the authoritarian capacity of radio stresses the particular power of sound technology when integrated with the material space of the home—or, as we might think of it, the conflation of aural mobility with material domesticity. Adorno argues that

[w]hen a private person in a private room is subjected to a public utility mediated by a loudspeaker, his response takes on aspects of a response to an authoritarian voice even if the content of that voice or the speaker to whom the individual is listening has no authoritarian features whatsoever....[T]he deeper this voice is involved within his own privacy, the more it appears to pour out of the cells of his most intimate life; the more he gets the impression that *his own cupboard, his own phonograph, his own bedroom speaks to him in a personal way, devoid of the intermediary stages of the printed word; the more perfectly he is ready to accept wholesale whatever he hears. It is just this privacy which fosters the authority of the radio voice and helps to hide it by making it no longer appear to come from outside...* Radio upholds the illusion of privacy and independence in a situation where such privacy and independence do not really exist" (Adorno 114, emphasis

mine).

Adorno expresses here the utter permeation of the private and the public, the presence of external voices—and the social influence they carry—within the fiber of one’s home, penetrating one’s very innermost thoughts and impressions.⁴⁷ These are the sorts of thoughts and impressions Dahlgren describes as “sense-making” and the beginning of public discourse. Before that move to public discourse, however, in Adorno’s view, whatever voice in which your bedroom speaks becomes a voice you hear as your own, for better or, as he understood it, for worse.

The mechanism Adorno sees as the problem however—and which can indeed constitute a threat—on the flip side of the coin also amplifies the elements of social protest present in the African American music traditions finding some measure of representation on the radio. As many have argued, from perspectives on the early blues women as representing a feminist African American consciousness to scholarship on later forms of jazz and bebop, these musical forms can be seen to lay the groundwork for and even constitute “both formal and political programs of resistance” (Wilson 274). The intimacy of radio, then, may transmit cultural productions expressing such resistance all the more effectively, allowing them to be not only ghosts in the machine of the dominant culture, but penetrating voices. According to Adorno’s view, these sounds may transport the subjectivity and aesthetic production of the musicians into not only the parlor cabinets, but into the thought processes of listeners, perhaps even confusing them as to which notions are their own and which have been imposed. We see here yet another kind of goat-glanding, in which the subject himself may be unable to tell which voices come from where, and thus whether his own (internal) voice and (external) body match. Of course, this sort of confusion could also be seen as a process by which listeners begin to assimilate new ideas or perspectives, by which individuals grow and change as they encounter new information,

adjusting their own understandings of what might constitute, for instance, the “best of urban culture,” or whether a voice or subjectivity or even body such as Bessie Smith’s could be incorporated into the “safe” space of the parlor. We might also see it as enacting Langston Hughes’ call in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” for “the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues [to] penetrate the closed ears of” African Americans he saw as neglecting their own race’s value in favor of mimicking white middle-class subjectivity (Hughes).

Aural Confusion, Aural Inclusion

And indeed, one of the most important effects of all, I would argue, is that of the potential for confusion that many have seen radio producing, confusion that would have tremendous implications for developing understandings of racial identity in the twentieth century. I refer here not to the slippage between internally and externally-produced ideas, but another sort of slippage between the internal and the external, that of the simultaneously deracinated and racialized radio voice and body. For, as Sarah Wilson argues, from the 1920s through the following decades, the aural coding of racial radio identity once again destabilized the link between the voiced persona and the person voicing it. She contends that “[r]adio’s gift to the mid-century formulation of race was aural confusion” (274), a confusion produced by the technology’s disembodiment effects.

More particularly, that confusion resulted from attempts to counteract the sense of disconnect between the broadcasted voice and the body to which it had originally belonged, a sense which was increasing at the time of Bessie Smith’s death in the late 1930s, when the comparatively low-tech, independent, and transparent realm of early radio was turning over to network control. As listeners could not visually identify speakers or performers, programs such as Amos n Andy “worked to stabilize this point of slippage by instating dialect as a marker of

blackness,” going so far as to refuse to hire black actors to voice black characters because they “didn’t ‘sound like a Negro’” (Wilson 274). Meanwhile, the primary voices representing African American speech and subjectivity on air in a more “serious” capacity belonged to Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Walter White of the NAACP, all of whom “undermined this aural regime by self-identifying as black while not sounding like either Amos or Andy” (274). Thus attempts to match the aural to the visual in fact only increased the disjuncture between radio representations and the sounding bodies they represented.

This negotiation of the aurality of race, meanwhile, carries on similar tensions already present in the rising recording industry and the initial marketing of “race records.” Bessie Smith had been rejected, for instance, when she auditioned to record for Black Swan, the only black-owned recording company operating at the time. The company’s motto—“The Only Genuine Colored Record—Others Are Only Passing”—figured its recording roster as an index of racial authenticity. Black Swan dismissed Smith, however, for being too raw and rural, her voice evidently representing a sort of blackness they wished to *dis*-authenticate. In this case, the label sought to enforce an ideal of urbane, sophisticated blackness, implying a paradoxical rejection both of whites who might try to benefit from the popularity of “race records” and of musicians “too black” to match the proposed racial ideal. While Black Swan’s purpose was in many ways the inverse of later radio programmers pushing towards radio minstrelsy to preserve white supremacist racial categories, we see in both cases the attempt to manage disembodied sound technology so as to control listeners’ perceptions of how race *sounds*.

That being said, there is evidence that for many, the association of embodied blackness with what is perceived as African American voice or vocal production not only persists but can attach its connotations to *white* bodies. Smith’s sound recording of “St. Louis Blues,” for

instance, has a complex history of being deployed in film to racialize sexuality, arrogating the imagined moral ambivalence and sexual promiscuity of the original, embodied black singer, to later female characters both black and white (Stanfield 102). While the history of this song's use may reinforce the alignment—or at least the memory thereof—of the vocal performance with the original, embodied, racially specific performer, it also signals further contestation over the organization of meaning around the most intimate material zone of the body, on the one hand, and its public, disembodied, reproducible, and mobile representations, on the other. In this case, the question is not who is singing, but to what extent the racial connotations of vocal production may attach to the listener. And while this issue applies to many artists, Smith's popularity and the wide-ranging use of "St. Louis Blues" makes her work a striking example of early-to mid-century attempts to understand—and indeed, to manipulate—media's potential to destabilize the links between aural, visual, and embodied identity.

As Sarah Wilson describes it, this instability has broad ramifications for the listening culture Smith and other popular musicians helped to bring about, for it moved beyond even the confusion of "voices and identities" to that of "seemingly stable racial positionings, communities, and alliances; of divisions between form and content, discussion and performance," all of which "were enabled by the mass dispersal of the disembodiment staged by the radio" (275). Wilson examines the work of Gertrude Stein in particular, arguing that in Stein's 1930s and 40s texts, "radio is employed as a form that enables *mêlées*—confusions of voices, identities, races, and programs....In this way, radio formally enacts the modernist constitution of 'contested public spheres,' forums in which community is in perpetual discursive formation and deformation" (275).⁴⁸ That is, radio enables productive confusion of identities, among other things, in a way which sustains productive destabilization of community definition

and affiliation. We can see its effects as having much the same civic potential as the confusions of identities and origins Faulkner suggests result from mass-production technologies and commodity culture: in rendering things such as racial identity illegible, they show the degree to which it is constructed, and often shoddily constructed at that. This suggestion, in turn, disrupts attempts to attenuate citizenship on grounds of identity or identity-based prejudice.

While Smith obviously does not produce these effects alone, she participates in and in many ways emblemizes the effects of radio-based aural confusion. Among other things, her presence in broadcasted and recorded soundscapes of the early 20th century certainly influenced a number of other authors and musicians, propelling their aesthetic and interior engagements with questions of race and inclusion, domestic life and the social order. Consider, for instance, James Baldwin's assertion that hearing Smith's voice on his Victrola allowed him "to come to terms with his status as a raced U.S. subject" (Kun 92)⁴⁹ but also to better understand himself as a collection of oppositional identities.⁵⁰ Or Ralph Ellison's meditations on the day he triggered an incident of racial rapprochement by blasting Smith's music through his apartment walls at a white, high-brow, opera-singing neighbor in what he called the "war of decibels."⁵¹ Whereas Ellison's use of Smith in the decibel wars uses the material domestic frame to trouble the racially-coded distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, Baldwin's response to hearing Smith through his Victrola, through the furniture of his home, furthers her own challenge to notions of what social practices and positions the home can properly contain.

As these and other examples suggest, Smith serves not only as a conceptual model but a true influence for many. Her significance is only compounded by her radio and recording activities and thus her involvement in effects from animating literary movements to denaturalizing approaches to civic inclusion. Keeping such ramifications in mind, I would

suggest, it continues to be significant that they are produced by way of the living room furniture. They are created by the tandem effects of sound and space, and more specifically by the aural dispersion of racial identity through the material domestic. They thus foreground the role of domestic space in receiving, transmitting, and framing the sonic booming, as it were, of modernity. That booming could only be amplified by the intimacy of the process, the “monstrous unreality” not only of the modern, but of its setting up shop in one’s parlor cabinets.

Improper Houses

No small part of that unsettled modernity, of course, was the shaking up of the social order in these years of political, demographic, and social change, the new manifestations of the nation’s old struggle to understand race. Home media’s role in processing—and more importantly still, in registering the instability of—racial identity enriches Robert Reid-Pharr’s conception of the nexus of race and domestic space in an earlier moment in literary history. Reid-Pharr argues that in the 19th-century African American literary tradition, race, the body, and the household come together in what he considers the “conjugal union” that produced the embodied black subject. In his formulation, the household “operates as the primary means of...corporealization, producing properly black subjects from the motley and often racially indeterminate group of pre-modern, strange figures who dotted the landscape of antebellum America and its environs” (88). Black voices entering late 19th- early 20th-century households via phonograph and radio at once complicates and amplifies Reid-Pharr’s view.

While “(black) bodies both constitute and are constituted by households” in 19th-century literature (65), early 20th-century aural forms of cultural production work towards dismantling the union Reid-Pharr describes occurring in narrative form. Through them, the household

disembodies rather than corporealizes, separating black bodies from black subjectivities even as *notions* of blackness may be reified by the sense of intimacy with a physically distant black community or individual, or by the presentation of the “authentic” black voice, whether it in fact originates in a black body or not. That being said, this contradiction aligns nonetheless with Reid-Pharr’s insistence on maintaining “an emphasis on ambiguity and indeterminacy, arguing that corporeal existence is always and inevitably awkward and unstable, even as it is figured as transparent and natural,” and certainly reinforces his suggestion that the household operates as a means of negotiating rather than simply producing the racially stable subject (65).⁵²

Smith’s performance, recording, and broadcasts, as conveyed by media technology to the homes of listeners, take part in these negotiations. Her work and example not only help to de-regulate rigid notions of “proper” identities, but—like her private train car—they do so by promoting a domesticity constituted by practices and subjectivities not permitted in normative notions of the domestic subject. Smith’s voice, emanating from the furniture itself, denaturalizes the constitution of private and public spaces, promotes a liberated interplay of social positionalities, and startles the dominant or mainstream social groups into hearing—on some level as their own thoughts—stories of “subaltern” American life. Much as Smith’s own lyrics do, this process expands conceptions of who and what can in fact constitute a successful domesticity, whether by unsettling domestic ideals in households containing people who already identify with her, or by unsettling the socio-aural constitution of households containing people who do not.

In *Conjugal Union*, Reid-Pharr asks, “What catastrophes await the erection of improper households? What more is to be achieved through this union” of the black body, the household, and aestheticization thereof? In a sense, Smith not only erects through her songs, not to mention

her train car, the “improper household” of Reid-Pharr’s musings, but she also enacts it by singing her way into the varied parlors of the nation, unsettling notions of American domestic propriety along the way. The content of her work—as modeled by her own domestic space and practices—encourages us to re-imagine our notions of home and elsewhere, interior and exterior, private and public, stability and instability, sessility and motion, and above all, the habits of thought which too easily align such dichotomies with those of containment and liberation. The cultural form of her work as well, moving beyond even its own aesthetic constructions to the social and technological modes of its dissemination, takes this challenge further, reinforcing the idea of the home as a framework for negotiating and troubling—rather than as a container for simplifying—such dichotomies and their relation to social positioning and subjectivity.

The result is nothing more or less than the “catastrophe” society often sees in aesthetic challenges to our most basic modes of thinking and being, our most intimate notions and the management of the physical and social spaces that reflect and shape such notions. We see in the distribution of Smith’s work through developing sound technology a new frame for the domestic subject—a modern guise for the old unstable racial body as crafted by the technological transformation of the domestic soundscape and its capacity to complicate the racial constitution of domestic space. And we see in Smith’s formulation of mobile domesticity the importance of the home in refiguring the connection between the “domestic,” socially specific body and the shifting social frameworks in which it operates, a process expressed as well in the technological developments that made her work audible to the American imagination in the early 20th century. Smith’s importance in these ways also further emphasizes the vitality of the home as a material locus of social mediation. It shows the importance of domestic space, sound, and sensibility as the arena where the consolidation and dispersal of domestic subjectivities and their related civic

positions are worked out. More broadly, her popularity represents the potential of African American cultural expression to aurally permeate—and thus to take part in re-constituting—an array of private and public spaces, thus re-drawing the socio-spatial dimensions of the ideal home as well as the public sphere it influences.

To return to the incident in the Van Vechten home described the beginning of this chapter, such an event, in which Smith's embodied presence brought the tensions of a social, political, and literary moment to a head, only manifests the surrounding dynamics of a culture trying to understand who and what can constitute its most intimate spaces and subjectivities, an effort that could not be represented more poignantly than by Smith's vocal and lyrical explorations of ideas of home, movement, and the private/public, dis/embodied domestic self. By foregrounding domestic space as the frame for these concerns, she denaturalizes the dangerous dream of home Rosemary Marangoly George illustrates—the perilous habit of figuring home as the stable location of familiarity, comfort, refuge, and sameness while projecting conflict and difference onto “othered” people and places.

As for the results of her explorations—celebrated by many but overlooked or considered crude and vulgar by plenty more—we might consider the world around Smith reacting to her own work much as she reacted to Fania Van Vechten's kiss. Certainly, there were plenty who might have felt they hadn't “never *heard*” the likes of Smith until there she was singing out of their parlor cabinets into the intimate corners of their own minds. Such a response, however, would also hint at their potential to gradually come around to hearing as legitimate what they might have been inclined before to resign to the realm of the abject, the vulgar, the improper. But of course, Smith's significance lies in her ability to highlight the folly of such dichotomies. And to do so, primarily, by bringing the sounds of “impropriety” into the “proper” home, and by

bringing the improper home into the notion of proper domesticity itself, thus creating a domechility of dis- and re-association, a domechility in which the subject can enact her own conceptions of individual, social, and civic legitimacy. In which she can resist formulations that demean, exclude, or threaten her and declare herself the keeper of her own house, free to come or go as she pleases, free to change that lock and key as needed, or get herself another door, or insist that those who would dismiss her must be the ones to pack their little trunks and roam.

Notes

¹ As Angela Davis points out, for example, blues women's "travels back and forth, away from and toward home, are frequently associated with the exercise of autonomy in their sexual lives" (67). Furthermore, Davis notes that free geographical and sexual circulation were particularly significant in constituting a "blues consciousness" because of their relation to the history of slavery, of which the proscription of travel and the prescription of sexuality were two defining constraints (8).

² Thus, Hazel Carby corroborates Davis' point at a broader demographic level, noting that these migrations "generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous" (739).

³ As various critics point out, blues women defied the prevailing insistence on what was essentially a set of bourgeois middle class values, according to which "[w]omen of that era were expected to seek fulfillment within the confines of marriage, with their husbands functioning as providers and their children as evidence of their worth as human beings" (Davis 11). Davis further points out that these touring entertainers often married but still "disengaged themselves from the usual confines of domesticity" in that "few actually bore children and built families as the center of their lives" (72). Carole Boyce Davies also suggests that the tension over desire and opportunity for movement often comes down to issues surrounding maternity, as "the mark of motherhood is often ascribed to women's inability to travel" (135). For example, one may see this figuration in African American women's texts such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. In these works, motherhood poses an active barrier to travel and in doing so subjects women to consequences ranging from physical endangerment to psychological despair. Indeed, as Davies discusses in regards to literary representations and as others discuss in more logistical, biographical terms, maternity epitomizes the traditional domestic sessility against which the blues women's mobility is posed. It represents a halting force in regards to both sexual circulation—particularly in light of the evacuation of sexuality from prevailing notions of proper woman- and motherhood—and geographical circulation, in that the mother must remain tied to the domestic space in which it is her duty to build and maintain her family.

⁴ As Hazel Carby points out, avoidance of this type of domestic fixity was as significant for many African American women as the resistance of a bourgeois middle class or New Negro Movement incentive to conform to the confinements of matrimony and motherhood. Indeed, as Carby suggests, “being a member of a vaudeville show or performing in a nightclub was not attractive primarily because it offered a mythic life of glamour but because it was a rare opportunity to do ‘clean’ work and to reject the life of a domestic servant” (752). In her work on the dynamics and history of African American domestic service in Washington D.C. between 1910 and 1940, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis discusses the position of the trained domestic as one of the primary, indeed one of the only, available professions for African American women migrating to northern and/or urban areas. This work often involved performing domestic labor in conditions that were economically and sexually exploitative. Furthermore, she discusses the trend of “living in,” and the degree to which doing so often prevented women from pursuing their own domestic lives (Clark-Lewis 165).

⁵ Kelly Miller’s piece “Surplus Negro Women” of 1908, for example, laments the abundance of what he terms as “residue” or “surplus” women “for whom there are neither present nor prospective husbands” (1). Leaving aside for the moment, of course, the possibility that an unmarried woman might do anything but waste oxygen, one may see in Miller’s response the cultural anxiety surrounding the possibility of a large population of single black women and the prevalence of the racist and misogynist notion that such a population would automatically pose a serious moral threat to society. His treatment of the subject further demonstrates the stifling force of the idea that the only conceivable strategy for dealing with such a population would be to channel them immediately into the only societal niche they might be fit to inhabit, i.e. that of domestic service.

⁶ Though in this instance she speaks specifically of travel, Davis discusses representations of autonomous sexuality as doing the same in that they “constructed a cultural site where masses of black women could associate themselves aesthetically” with these types of free circulation “as a mode of freedom. Blues representations of women engaged in self-initiated and independent travel constitute a significant moment of ideological opposition to the prevailing assumptions about women’s place in society” (67).

⁷ For a fuller critique and comparison of these perspectives, see Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women*, and Elizabeth Pritchard, “The Way Out West: Development and the Rhetoric of Mobility in Postmodern Feminist Theory.” Braidotti, for instance, specifically identifies “nomadism” as a model for this flexible and free subject and the capability of its critical consciousness to resist entrenched modes of thought. While she cautions that these nomadic

figures may be too easily homogenized by the colonial gaze, Pritchard argues that Braidotti gives in to this process of homogenization even as she warns against it. Regarding the purposes of this discussion, Bessie Smith does not register as a transnational “nomad,” per se, but the critical issue is that in her case, as well, we must guard against conflating all mobilities and mobile subjects into icons of empowerment and remain alert to questions of political, national, sexual, and racial particularity. Or, as Cotten Seiler notes, in considering the social mobility associated with the auto/mobile, we must always keep in mind questions about the “always raced identity of the traveler/passenger/driver” (“Transport History” 307).

⁸ I am particularly indebted to the work of Deborah Clarke for her insight on the ways in which the gender politics of automobile culture, and thus more broadly of the technologies of mobility in the American 20th century, illustrate recent debates in mobility theory.

⁹ While performers were generally paid for their work, TOBA often failed to come through. As Harrison notes, the prevailing “pay-as-you-go” practice, combined with TOBA’s arrangements to maximize the profits for theatres, meant that “performers were often left with nothing except promises to pay later” (28).

¹⁰ I rely here on Angela Davis’ comprehensive transcriptions of the lyrics of Bessie Smith’s recordings in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, her extensive, powerful study of the lives and work of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday.

¹¹ These and other lyrics that reference a Southern home also have implications in regards to dissatisfaction in the wake of the Great Migration and the ongoing general significance of the South as an ideological space of both origin and destination. Both Davis and Harrison, among others, discuss these issues, and the richness of material in the song lyrics certainly invites further study. Also noteworthy is Jon Michael Spencer’s exploration of the dynamics of Northern/Southern and rural/urban themes and performance thereof over the development of blues music in his piece, “The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950.”

¹² Blues nostalgia for a southern home also provides interesting, if potentially problematic, grounds for comparison to the sort of nostalgia for a lost southern home expressed in Faulkner’s work, for instance. While such nostalgia in blues songs in no way diminishes the cause many black southerners had to migrate north, it reminds us that notions of “home” have a grip on the imagination that work across racial lines to complicate stances for or against the social politics of geographical spaces and can also draw attention to the limitations of geographical movement to fully remedy the concerns that triggered it.

¹³ As Jewell and others discuss, even with increasing salaries and the influence of government programs promoting home ownership over the 20th century, and even taking into account the growth of homeownership rates for African Americans in that time, “the rate of home ownership for African American families consistently lagged behind that of whites” (87). See also Thomas Shapiro’s *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* for a discussion of the racial inequities of homeownership in the 21st century. Shapiro finds that for those who do own their homes, “home equity is color coded” as “residential segregation” of neighborhoods “costs African American homeowners enormous amounts of money by suppressing their home equity in comparison to that of white homeowners. The inescapable corollary is that residential segregation benefits white homeowners with greater home equity wealth accumulation” (121). The National Urban League website also continues its mission to counteract the disproportionate effects of housing difficulties—including, at the moment, those of the recent foreclosure crisis—on African Americans, offering various homeownership counseling and education services. Historical and ongoing disparities notwithstanding, see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* for a discussion of the largely overlooked role of African Americans and African American suburbs in the changing residential landscape of the century.

¹⁴ Though in a less pointed way, the same dynamic describes the Great Migration, which unfolded alongside Smith’s fame. For those fleeing segregation, discrimination, or a poverty fueled by racist cultural practices, movement represents liberation from those things. It also highlights, however, the degree to which such movement is forced, in a sense, by the oppressive conditions left behind and may be a hardship that furthermore in no way guarantees a better life to be found elsewhere.

¹⁵ It is interesting to consider here, as well, Bryan Wagner’s exploration in *Disturbing the Peace* of the criminalization of African American males’ mobility in the vagrancy laws that followed Emancipation. Particularly relevant is “Chapter Three: Black Vagrancy and the Political Economy of the Blues Ballad,” in which Wagner discusses the ways in which these issues affected and were manifested in the lives and lyrics of black itinerant musicians in the decades following Emancipation. As Wagner demonstrates, the notion of black mobility as inherently transgressive applies to African American males as well as females in and around the 1920’s, though society’s inflections of this transgression play out differently across the gender line. He further demonstrates ways in which the blues offered an ideological space of mobility for African Americans, though again, while this mobility involves similar elements for both genders—such as its association with sexuality—the implications are often

different, as black female sexuality in the 1920's carried its own particular connotations and consequences, such as those explored by Carby and Miller.

¹⁶ And indeed, the use of food imagery here to launch a domestic power struggle also invites further consideration of the prominent imbrication of the domestic and the sexual in the blues tradition, the spatial valence of those metaphors, and the degree to which they not only code sexuality but may express and comment on domestic labor in itself. Though focusing later—on the 1960s and beyond—Doris Witt discusses related issues through tropes of soul food and appetite in *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*.

¹⁷ Indeed, the sexuality addressed in “Put It Right Here,” like the sexuality implied in “Lock and Key,” is still a formulation that is far removed from the forms of sexuality associated with the chaste motherhood of middle class bourgeois domesticity or with the potential exploitation of domestic labor. Whatever the additional valences at play, the speaker insists in these pieces, fundamentally, on her right to determine and set her own boundaries, figuring the domestic space as one that is defined, then, largely by her independence and agency rather than by conventional notions of motherhood or professional labor.

¹⁸ In their work tracing the progression of blues music from the southern vaudeville stage to the urban commercial sphere, Abbott and Seroff note the ubiquity of the double entendre in blues lyrics and indeed the degree to which people believed that black audiences demanded it. Abbott and Seroff provide, for instance, an excerpt from a somewhat snarky anti-blues newspaper article from 1912, in which the writer claims that the blues audiences “‘like a little smut, and things with a double meaning. If you don’t put it on you can’t make it there’” (414). Though this comment comes from a writer with an anti-blues bias, it is nonetheless true that double entendres proliferate in blues lyrics. I would argue that this frequent use of multiple meanings, by creating a mode in which it is common to conflate literally disparate notions, generally facilitates the conflation of the non-traditional associations the blues women frequently negotiate in regards to mobility and domesticity.

¹⁹ One web site, for instance, describes the car in a way which reveals its ideological significance even though the site does not fully substantiate its claim on the logistical details: “When she went on the road in the South, she had a hard time finding decent hotels that would allow a black guest. So she bought her own private railroad car, 78 feet long, with two stories and seven rooms, including a kitchen and a lower level that could hold 35 people” (Writer’s Almanac). In fact, technically, her brother may have bought it (Albertson 23), and the details of its dimensions are

not easy to confirm. Most importantly, however, this description demonstrates the car's significance as a symbol of Smith's wealth, independence, and prestige.

²⁰ While critics more often describe erotic blues treatments of automobiles, the autonomy associated with Smith's private train car allows it to operate in a similar way, representing the "active as opposed to a passive right of way" E. L. Widmer attributes to the prominence of cars rather than trains as sexualized objects in the blues. See, for instance, E. L. Widmer, "The Automobile, Rock and Roll and Democracy," for a brief survey of representative blues lyrics and Joel Dinerstein's *Swinging the Machine* for more in-depth readings of the varied roles of mobility technologies in African American cultural production.

²¹ As Jack's niece Ruby Walker, who was part of the show, once commented, "'Man or woman, she loved them young'" (Albertson, *Bessie* 82). Albertson also specifies that "Bessie's ribald asides always took place on the road in Jack's absence and promptly ended with his return" (Albertson, *Bessie* 82), a fact which at once confirms the potential and limits of the train car in sustaining an alternate domesticity, in the sense that it provides a temporary and possibly illicit alternative rather than fully re-sets the terms of her domestic life. Still, the potential for alternation itself, and her ongoing commitment to both modes, is significant.

²² Regarding Smith's personal claim on the railroad car as a domestic space, see also Amy G. Richter's *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, & the Rise of Public Domesticity*. In this study, Richter discusses the gender dynamics of the railroad and the space of the train car in the 19th Century. She explores the ways in which the increasing presence of women on railroad cars led to the increasing domestication of the cars themselves and how, in turn, this presence of the domestic in public spaces led to an increasing domestication of the public sphere itself.

²³ Despite the significant differences between the vehicles at hand, Smith's train car in many ways provides the same sort of possibility Clarke outlines for women's vehicular independence and agency, in that it changes her relationship to domestic space by allowing her greater flexibility in moving across the private-public divide, such as it is. Smith's use of mobility technology for her own personal purposes models much the same spatial mediation of gender roles and social possibilities that Clarke describes, in Smith's case by facilitating greater control over her career and social position, challenging her subjugation to the racist cultural practices that complicated and even endangered the lives of African American travelers, and bolstering her cultural status as an embodiment of transgressive independence. As does the 'automotive citizenship' Clarke describes, Smith brings together concerns about domestic space, mobility, and the way in which the two concepts meet, allowing women to more fully claim

their citizenship through enhanced options for breaching and navigating the public-private divide, which we might also see as the literal and conceptual point where domestic space and subjectivity meet public/civic subjectivity and participation.

²⁴ This dynamic became even stronger, as Seiler notes, with the ongoing development of national infrastructure, and thus of highways which move vehicles at higher speeds and less frequently subject drivers to direct encounter with others at stoplights, low speeds, etc. (“Something Authentic” 1110).

²⁵ Minus, of course, his aforesaid exclusion of all but the white male European bourgeoisie from the “all citizens” he believed should be guaranteed access to it (qtd. in Ryan 11).

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of how these perceptions developed and played out, see Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825*, especially Chapter Two, “Everyday Space: Gender and the Geography of the Public.” See also Chapter Three, which moves from considering the real or imagined sexual connotations of (some) women’s public presence to considering the particular ways in which

²⁷ Kerber focuses primarily on the effects of this issue on African American women as part of a larger exploration of the interactions between gender and the obligations as opposed to rights of citizenship, the obligation not be vagrant being one of the foremost among them. Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace*, on the other hand, as mentioned above, focuses instead on the effects of vagrancy laws on black male mobility.

²⁸ As Kerber demonstrates, these sorts of dynamics continued into the 20th century in a variety of ways (74).

²⁹ As Ryan shows, these conflicting conceptions of public presence according to gender, race, and class positions reflected the dominant culture’s need to create “order and hierarchy” in the midst of the “interplay of diversity and proximity” of 19th-century urban spaces (Ryan 75), in which the race and class contours of social relations were indeed changing.

³⁰ The notion was prompted by John Hammond’s suggestion in a *Down Beat* article shortly after Smith’s death, perpetuated by many at this time, and then notably furthered by Edward Albee’s 1959 dramatized one-act play account, *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

³¹ From here, accounts include anything from increasingly hopeless hours of Smith’s friends driving her around town in search of a hospital that will treat her to Smith’s expiring on the roadside while a white cop leans over her spitting insults about black drivers. Record company executive John Hammond published the rumor in a *Downbeat* article soon after Smith’s death, possibly with the awareness that the rumor might increase sales of records of hers

that would soon be reissued. He later withdrew the claim (Jarvis). Meanwhile, the rumor was also perpetuated by Alan Lomax in his influential study, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, in which he relates the incident as evidence that black Southerners “all knew there was little mercy in their surroundings. They had heard about what had happened to Bessie Smith in 1937 in their hometown. Wounded in a local car wreck, the great blues singer was refused admission to three Clarksdale hospitals because she was black. In the end she bled to death without medical attention, while her friends pled with the hospital authorities to admit her. And this incident was typical of the Deep South” (61).

³² His account is based on interviews with the black ambulance driver, who confirms that he drove Smith directly to the nearby black hospital, as well as one of the doctors who tried to save her in the hours between when she arrived at the hospital and then died, never having regained consciousness.

³³ Edward Albee’s 1959 play “The Death of Bessie Smith,” written well before Albertson’s biography, dramatizes the apocryphal, racialized view of the incident through conversations between white and black staff members at a “Whites-only” hospital on the day of her death, for instance. It is notable that Smith never appears but it only referred to in the play, a fact that unintentionally highlights the distance between her actual experience and representations thereof.

³⁶ She also displays, here, a degree of agency that distinguishes the Smith of the film from the more dependent persona she voices in the song “Baby, Won’t You Please Come Home,” in which the singer’s professions of love and broken-hearted longing for her lover’s return culminate in concerns about her *inability* to pay the rent without him, as the “[l]andlord’s gettin’ worse/ I got to move May first/ Baby, won’t you please come home, I need money...” (Davis 263). Though she represents different ends of the spectrum in these respective pieces, both reinforce the degree to which love and sex are inextricably linked, in the worlds of her songs, to economic control over private domestic space.

³⁷ Regarding “race records” more generally, Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin discuss in *Southern Music/American Music* the sense of obligation amongst black listeners—as encouraged, for instance, by the *Chicago Defender*—to acquire and help distribute black artists’ recordings: “It became a matter of racial pride, and an example of incipient black nationalism, to support such musical expression. Pullman porters brought armloads of records south on their runs out of Chicago, and African Americans everywhere purchased records in great quantities. Phonographs were highly prized pieces of furniture in black tenant farmers’ homes, and even those farmers who did not own them

often bought records that they played on their neighbors' machines" (47). They note, further that phonograph records remained the more popular means of distributing black music for some time, as radio reception was unreliable in many areas. These details, in addition to confirming the importance of "race records" to black listeners, and their participation in making the market for them thrive, bring out an array of further issues that resonate with Bessie Smith's personal practices, aesthetic suggestions, and their implications. We see, among other things, the role of the railroad in distributing black musicians' work, which highlights the degree to which her mobile train car home was part of the very market she traveled to participate in. Meanwhile, the notion of phonographs as highly prized pieces of furniture demonstrates the degree to which her music not only could be projected into the domestic spaces of others, but music becomes domestic materiality itself, constituting an important physical element of the home. And finally, this excerpt highlights the racial and economic valences of even the varying forms of sound technology, as records are associated with the listening of the rural poor, including much of Smith's black audience, while radio is associated with the urban spaces whose racial constitutions were shifting with the Great Migration.

³⁸ Peter Stanfield, for instance, evaluates the reception history of "St. Louis Blues" as both song and film, finding that "[r]ather than the consciousness raising that Davis believes is present in female blues performances, Hollywood used blues songs stereotypically as soundtracks for displays of urban primitivism" (93).

³⁹ In this respect, we can see how the sounds of domestic space are as important as its material elements in unpacking the importance of the house to post-bellum constructions of race relations during and after slavery. See the earlier discussion regarding *Absalom, Absalom!*

⁴⁰ The term references the dubious medical practice of surgically implanting goat glands in men to restore sexual potency (222), thus carrying connotations of appropriation as well as a joining of incongruous elements.

⁴¹ Though, having to personally chase a KKK member out of her audience, it seems, ought to register somewhere on that scale.

⁴² While I focus on the radio here, the phonograph has quite a similar kind and degree of significance. In many ways, the two forms have similar significance, as they both represent sound technologies that bring an outside voice into the home in more and less tangible ways. That being said, they also differ in key ways, primarily regarding the degree of choice a listener has over the material at hand. The listener chooses her own records to play and the sounds originate, in an immediate sense, from the record in the listener's hand, while radio broadcasts are determined elsewhere, often by obscure sources, and thus the source of the sound seems further away and more

autonomous. For my purposes, this distinction is important, but it does not diminish the degree to which both kinds of technology signify as modes of collapsing the apparent distance between the listener and the source of the music being heard.

⁴³ See Randall Patnode, “‘What These People Need is Radio’: New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s America,” for a full discussion, for instance, of how early radio discourse figured rural people as “other” and presented radio technology as the thing that would fulfill such outliers and bring them into the cultural fold, as represented by ever-growing urban centers where the culture supposedly was occurring.

⁴⁴ Silverstone and Haddon evaluate here the phenomenon they call the “design/domestication interface,” by which both users and producers take part in shaping the incorporation of new technologies into the home and personal life.

⁴⁵ In addition to work that describes the history of the radio in American and Anglophone culture, recent years have seen a swell in criticism about the importance of radio to literary modernism, specifically. A few of these in-depth studies, which address understandings of radio and intimacy, among other things, include Michele Hilmes’ *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-52*, Avery Todd’s *Radio Modernism*, and the recent collection *Broadcasting Modernism*, edited by Cohen, Coyle, and Lewty.

⁴⁶ This is particularly striking, as the earliest known recordings of Smith date to the following year, 1923. There have been, however, rumors of earlier recordings, though none have been found. As Buzzy Jackson notes, this anecdote may either confirm such rumors or, on the other hand, “Smith may very well have concocted the set as a personal vision of what was to come” (46), thus presaging both her own success and the degree to which developing sound technology would come to mediate between performers and listeners.

⁴⁷ While this view might seem not to apply to the radio voices such as Smith’s that were themselves marginalized within the framework of network control, David Jenemann argues that Adorno was not in this case expressing an elitism that disregarded less “serious” programming such as jazz and blues, but rather considered such variations to be components of the authoritarian whole, red herrings at best.

⁴⁸ Taking part in the growing trend of attention to the importance of various radio features to literary modernism, Wilson notes Stein’s insistence on radio’s capacity to bring many varied voices together (267). She also argues, however, that Stein’s later writings acknowledge the limitations of radio’s democratic potential, even directly problematizing (273) the absence of African American voices as form (i.e. as talk, self-aware commentary) rather than content (i.e. as popular music programming) on the radio. She thus asserts the importance of sound

technology—in its capacity to mediate the sound of the voice and the implied (whether racial or otherwise defined) identity of the embodied speaker or performer—to modernist formulations of not just race, speech, and the body, but also to broader understandings and destabilizations of the relation between signs and signifiers.

⁴⁹ Josh Kun raises this example to illustrate his concept of “audiotopia,” which he uses to describe the interplay of space and sound at the intersections of race and music in American culture. He highlights Smith’s importance to James Baldwin’s personal and literary explorations of racial, national, and sexual identification during a critical period when he lived in Switzerland with his lover in what biographer David Leeming would consider Baldwin’s closest brush with an ideal domestic life. “During these months of gay domesticity and national and racial self-examination,” Kun notes, “[Smith’s] voice was heard every day on the portable Victrola that Baldwin took with him to his mountain retreat” (87). At first, she struck Baldwin as “the summation of all stereotypes, all the prejudices, all the projected racial and sexual fantasies...and all the externally imposed self-hate” (Kun 94) that composed the derogative American notion of black identity Baldwin was trying to escape. This initial sense of Smith’s voice took new form for Baldwin, however, when he left the U.S. and began to identify with her differently. Listening to her music instead in Europe allowed him, as Kun argues, to make a certain peace with his relationship to racial and national identity in his home country (92). In this case his response to Smith *as* a black singer privileges sound technology’s potential to represent a specifically embodied racial subjectivity.

⁵⁰ In this regard, as Kun suggests, Baldwin came to appreciate Smith capacity to destabilize rather than reify categories of meaning. He filled his home with Smith’s voice as “a way of confronting, voicing, and grappling with his sexual and racial identities” (89). Kun locates Baldwin according to Houston Baker Jr.’s formulation of the blues as reflecting and creating subjectivities in flux, producing a subject that is, “like the music it emerges from, a ‘scene of arrivals and departures’ that is ‘betwixt and between’ fixed positionalities” (Kun 89). For Baldwin, Smith’s work represents not only shifting notions of racial identification but also the unsettling of fixed categories of sexuality. By playing her records in the intimacy of his own home, removed from the American context that had motivated him to police his own racial and sexual identification, he finds through Smith “an identificatory crossroads where being queer and being black are not mutually exclusive terms” but rather can be experienced in fluid, overlapping, and mutually-informing ways (89).

⁵¹ In the essay “Living With Music,” Ellison describes this “war of decibels” with an opera-singing neighbor whose practices interrupt his writing. He answers her aural parries with blasts of song responding in content as well as

volume: “If she polished a spiritual to a meaningless artiness I’d play Bessie Smith to remind her of the earth out of which we came” (Ellison 12). Ellison figures Smith’s voice as conveying an earthy, grounded, authentic blackness, the very idea of blackness for which she had been rejected from the more “refined” record labels, and perhaps the same idea of blackness Langston Hughes’ demanded the “near-intellectual” black proponents of uplift should open their ears to by listening to Smith. In this regard, he reinforces the enduring connection between raced voice and body. Another sort of destabilization is also essential to this incident, however, as the war of decibels literally seems ready to shake the house apart. He describes the peril that racially-inflected sound technology has created in his household, as the sound system over which he blasts Smith’s voice has been rigged up meticulously but disruptively all around the house: “There were wires and pieces of equipment all over the tiny apartment...and it was worth your life to move about without first taking careful bearings” (11). In addition to this general condition of household upset, Ellison’s domestic dispute with the upstairs neighbor enters Smith’s voice into a struggle that results in an image of inter-racial and cultural exchange that unsettles rather than reifies racially-defined subject positions. For, as Ellison notes, when he later meets this neighbor, she reacts not with anger but with curiosity, asking about the artists whose work he has played, pausing in future practices to listen to and applaud his selections, and “mark[ing] the phrasings of the great singers I sent her way,...improv[ing] her style” (13). The end result of Ellison’s insistence on the racially-specific voice is an overall enhancement of and cultural mingling within aesthetic production rather than a combative polarization of social and cultural positions, all of it conducted through the material domestic framework of the thin, trembling walls and floors conducting the sounds in play. Thus, this incident ultimately reinforces the sort of domestic destabilization Smith’s lyrics promote along with that re-figured domesticity’s implications for the racially embodied subject.

⁵² Indeed, the contradictions of domestic sound technology take the question of ambiguity a step further; the indeterminacy inherent to the link between radio voice and body is compounded by the notion that the radio voice, and its racial inflections, may confuse one’s own sense of interiority and thus of one’s own mind-body connection.

Coda

Talking with the House Itself

"All fiction is homesickness....All homesickness is fiction." –Rosemary Marangoly George

"‘The United States—How can you live in that country?’ the man had asked. Agnes had shrugged. ‘A lot of my stuff is there,’ she’d said, and it was then that she first felt all the dark love and shame that came from the pure accident of home, the deep and arbitrary place that happened to be yours."

–Lorrie Moore, Birds of America

Michael Bluth: What have we always said is the most important thing?

George Michael Bluth: Breakfast.

Michael Bluth: Family.

George Michael Bluth: Oh, right. Family. I thought you meant of the things you eat.

–Arrested Development

A quick glance from the early 20th century to the early 21st shows that media continues to fill the nation’s varied domestic spaces with visions of improper homes, from the narratives of suburban disillusionment inspiring studies of “neodomestic” fiction to internet debates over the implications of “Homesteading” and the “New Domesticity,” to reality shows about hoarding, to the RV-turned-roving-meth-lab of the hit TV series *Breaking Bad*. As the combination of Bessie Smith’s lyrical content and radio mobility suggests, these stories and images continue to stream into the intimate material and intellectual spaces of their audiences, both reinforcing and challenging notions of what the home can and should be and even taking some small part in re-constituting the home spaces in which they may be consumed. Just as it is vital to understand how narratives of domesticity have shaped the cultural imagination—and, to some extent, its social and spatial configurations of belonging— at critical historical moments, it is vital to consider how those narratives have developed over the century into the forms they take today.

While contemporary treatments of domesticity are beyond the scope of this discussion, I’d like to conclude by touching on a particularly poignant one from recent years. The television show *Arrested Development* premiered in 2003, ran on the Fox network for three seasons, attracted tremendous critical acclaim, was canceled, and created such an outcry from its

passionate fans that Netflix picked it up to air a final season exclusively on-line. Both the show's popularity and its cancellation, I would suggest, likely have to do with its biting humor in exposing the mythology of modern-day domestic ideals, which it does by portraying the quirks of a deeply dysfunctional family living in the shell of a dream house.

The show centers largely on Michael Bluth, who must step in to keep his formerly wealthy family and their McMansion housing development business together when it turns out that his father, George Sr., is under investigation by the SEC and the family is plunged into scandal. Shenanigans ensue, many of them involving heightened attention to the domestic and quasi-domestic spaces of Michael's house—he lives in one of the family company's model homes—and the prison in which his father is being held and comes to feel quite at home. Ultimately,¹ we learn that George Sr. is under investigation for good reason; he has done some shady dealings building model houses for Saddam Hussein in Iraq (thus bringing Babbitt's vision of suburbanizing the globe to a kind of fruition). In a late episode, one of these houses turns out to be inhabited by a group of Hussein's body doubles. Also, there is a nuclear warhead stashed in one of the secret rooms the Bluth model houses turn out to have. (A fake warhead, made by the same company that made the fake decorations gracing the Bluth model home.) Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, one of the Bluth brothers accidentally incites a riot of Iraqis chanting "Burn Bush!" Overall, though, "back in the American model home," as an episode synopsis puts it, Michael continues to reluctantly work to keep his family home together. He has to work hard, not only because of the aforementioned family dysfunction but because the model home is literally falling apart—chairs collapsing, handles and railings and floors giving way—due to shoddy workmanship.

The show's only treason, as it were, is its premise, plus everything that follows. Teasing apart its attitudes—toward the home and family at its center, the balance between endearing quirk and searing critique, the suggestion that corporate corruption eats at the heart of the American dream house and family, the relationship between the American and Iraqi model homes, the comparison between prison and the model McMansion—is the work of another project. For the moment, though, it is worth noting that this show dramatizes the concept of “the American model home” and dismantles it one shoddy door handle, familial miscommunication, and SEC violation at a time. It seems to have taken to heart the lessons of narratives such as those studied in greater depth above. With less of the evident gravitas of some of these works and perhaps more of Barnes' sense of humorous disjuncture, it distills much of their questioning into staging the limitations of the American Dream as filtered through the material space of the American dream home. It too dramatizes and debunks the American dream home's mythology of refuge, its imagined sanctuary of sameness and security, foregrounding instead its ceaseless conflict within and between individuals and ultimately nations. And it too stages the tension between awareness of that home's limitations and the various reasons, many of them justified, for enduring attachment to it. The fact that it stages these themes in an *actual* model home makes the metaphor the very floor its characters tread—or fall through, as the case may be—thus hinting at a new era in cultural productions denaturalizing ideal domesticity. It can be no coincidence that this show should do so in a way that seems at once to pre-figure and track the early 21st-century housing crisis in real-time.

The dream house *Arrested Development* lampoons and dismantles is a direct descendant of the OYOH-style model bungalow and family lurking in the background of the texts studied here. As these texts suggest, that model—indeed, the very concept of one's social and civic

validity being contingent on adherence to such a limited ideal—is the threat lurking inside the house, the warhead in the secret room, the blend of private and emotional and economic and political interests that furnishes both real warheads and fake decor. This discussion only begins to address early 20th-century fiction’s engagement with the mythology of ideal domestic space- and self-building. I have examined each text in depth in order to emphasize the degree to which such concerns permeate the narratives at hand. I have selected a handful of texts that differ in obvious and significant ways both thematically and aesthetically in order to signal the degree to which such concerns register across the divides of genre and geography, subject position and social affiliation.

It remains, however, to fully articulate the links between these and other texts, the breadth of narrative engagement with the subject, and the degree to which such examples may sustain a genre of their own. I hope, however, that these readings begin to demonstrate the importance of examining narratives about “home” in the context of the cultural discourses about domestic space and practice that animate them, and which they shape in turn. Doing so helps to clarify, denaturalize, and productively critique the historical narratives of ideal domesticity that continue to motivate individuals in their life goals. Furthermore, it helps us better understand how such mythologies were created, how they were received, how they were protested and perpetuated, and how they continue to interact with not only personal economies of success but the national and global economies intertwined with the housing industry and related banking and lending practices.

Examining the cultural and narrative moment of the early 20th century in relation to domestic space and domesticity also helps us to fill the gaps in our understanding of literary history. Shifting the focus to this spatial framework and hearing the stories these spaces have to

tell illuminates pathways of exchange between varied aesthetic movements and urges us to continually question own critical categories. It foregrounds the oft-overlooked literary investments in the material conditions that mediate between our private and public lives, our imagined pasts and futures, our dreams of refuge and our commitments to honest encounter. It also shows the vital role of literature in questioning the terms and practices of the “home” spaces of democracy, from the domestic space of the kitchen table to the domestic space of the nation. As Honig’s notion of dilemmatic democracy suggests, there is no total refuge from the conflicts inherent to individual and group identity, and it is a particular mistake to conflate the desired refuge with definitions of “home,” be it the material space of an individual house or the geographical space of a national unit. The works in this study, among many others, treat the home as the conflictual space it is, sometimes highlighting the danger of that conflict and sometimes highlighting its coalitional potential. As works of aesthetic representation, they offer a way to think about political representation as the *expression* rather than the obfuscation of difference. They work towards better negotiating the confusions of in/distinction inherent to managing a home in which it is essential to treat people as equal and thus in some sense interchangeable subjects while also truly valuing social variation and developing the intellectual and institutional suppleness to tread the unstable ground of our internal inconsistencies.

With these concerns in mind, the discussions included here build on the efforts of others to further critical conversations about domestic space and practice, and they join the call for continued work on examining past and present literary constructions of home so as to better understand our own constructions of individual and collective experience, the material forms that shape them, and the material consequences they produce. In what is, granted, not a cheerful moment of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we find Sutpen sitting with the vexed family unit he has created,

talking not to them, “the three minds capable of listening, but to the air, the waiting grim decaying presence, spirit, of the house itself...” (129). This moment reinforces the menace associated with misguided domestic constructions. It also, however, gives readers a way to change the key or get themselves a different door. It directs them to find their way by paying attention to what that house might have to say; this text, one that so highly values the dialogic production of meaning, adds “the house itself” to its collection of interlocutors. For our living spaces do hear us, in a sense, registering our values and changing as our notions change. They also talk back, shaping, reinforcing, and complicating our notions in turn. The very fibers of the living room furniture sing their songs right into our ears. To sustain a robust criticism that productively links the space of interpretation to the lived experience of our own material contexts, we must continue to examine the literature of socio-spatial domesticity, making sure our conversations include the house itself.

Notes

¹ With my apologies for the spoiler...

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