

**The Architecture of Longing:**  
Objects, Affect, and the Poetics of Home in Twentieth-Century  
American Literature and Culture

by

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For my father, Paul A. MacKenzie

1942-2003

*Ich möchte Sie, so gut ich es kann, bitten, Geduld zu haben gegen alles Ungelöste in Ihrem Herzen und zu versuchen, die Fragen selbst liebzuhaben wie verschlossene Stuben und wie Bücher, die in einer sehr fremden Sprache geschrieben sind. Forschen Sie jetzt nicht nach den Antworten, die Ihnen nicht gegeben werden können, weil Sie sie nicht leben könnten. Und es handelt sich darum, alles zu leben. Leben Sie jetzt die Fragen. Vielleicht leben Sie dann allmählich, ohne es zu merken, eines fernen Tages in die Antwort hinein.*

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

-Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: The Architecture of Longing

It all depends on what you mean by home.  
-Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man"

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.  
-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

"A great many of our memories are housed," writes Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1964), and "all our lives we come back to them in our daydreams." By remembering the houses and rooms of our childhood, those first intimate places of our lives, his theory continues, not only do individuals learn to envision the possibility of other times, but, in a broader sense, we "learn to abide within ourselves."<sup>1</sup> I could tell a million stories about my childhood home, all the secrets it held, room by room, from the loose floorboard in the attic that I would vigilantly avoid for fear of falling through, to the heinous high pile green carpet downstairs and the black cast iron wood-burning stove that sat on a brick platform in the dining room, bottles of Sarsaparilla lined on the edge. But instead, this story will begin in another room in another house, my grandmother's, forty-five minutes away, in the rural Pennsylvania farmland.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), xxxviii.

My grandmother lived in Amish country, land of flea markets and apple butter. I have especially vivid memories of this place, even if the house itself was unremarkable: a typical, all white, single-family house built some time in the 1950s, with an apple tree in the yard and a pickup truck in the garage. Inside it smelled like Virginia Slims and Folgers, with a hint of fried bacon and old people. But one of my favorite places in the world was my grandmother's bedroom. It was a pile of unexplored mysteries, of mismatched patterns and textiles with no discernable color scheme. There were three things in particular that made this room a wonderland. First: the Craftmatic Adjustable Bed. For my sister and me, this contraption provided hours of amusement-park-like entertainment. We would test every possible upper-lower body combination, fashioning the flexible mattress into some ungodly angle and then resting there, letting out a melodramatic sigh, as if we'd *finally* reached the Promised Land of comfort that all other beds were consistently denying us. Second was the pair of opalescent, urn-shaped lamps on either side of the bed. To the naked eye, there was nothing spectacular about these lamps, even if they were, like so many of the objects in that house, the color of pearls. But the naked eye, of course, would have no way of knowing that these lamps were magical. For these lamps required no switches or pulls—to turn these lamps on *all you had to do was touch them!* Tap three times and they would glow even brighter! Magic.

But what I remember most about this room, what will forever bring me back to that place, is the eerie painting that was on the wall by the window, a reproduction that was framed in brass and somewhat unnerving. The painting was “Christina’s World” (1948) by Andrew Wyeth. It was one of the most popular American paintings of the twentieth century (despite being largely

scorned by art world insiders).<sup>2</sup> But of course I didn't know that; I couldn't have been more than nine years old. If I had known of its mass popularity, though, I think I may have been baffled—the painting wasn't all that beautiful, in fact it was mostly gray; a portrait of dry grass, an empty field, and a young woman with dark hair like mine, in a pale pink dress. She sits alone in a field, her posture somehow both awkward and graceful. Her back to the viewer, she is propped up by her right arm, while her left hand reaches, along with her gaze, to a weather-beaten farmhouse far off—though it is difficult to discern how far off—in the distance. I still don't know, though it has slowly become more clear throughout the long process of completing this project, why I was, and why I remain, so captivated, so *haunted*, by this painting, or what it is about it that made me feel so wistful and weird, even as a nine-year-old child. I remember sometimes consciously trying *not* to look at, when I was unwilling or unprepared to go to the place that I knew it would take me.

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<sup>2</sup> Eclipsed by the popularity of Abstract Expressionism at mid-century, critical reactions to Wyeth's paintings were tepid at best, his style often devalued as being anti-modern, rural, and sentimental. At a moment wherein artists championed irony and objectivity, Wyeth's art "came in the popular mind to embody both traditional notions of patriotism and sincerity and the type of taciturn hardiness associated with his New England ancestors." But this was not always the case. Notes curator Kathleen Foster in a *New York Times* article following the artist's death in 2009: "[Wyeth] was a kind of virtuoso whose work was intensely modern, with an enormous emotional resonance." She added, however, that many still perceive his work as "just corny Americana." Nonetheless, *Christina's World* undoubtedly is a staple of Americana, and the image is continually referenced in multiple avenues of American cultural production from literature and film to visual art. Forty-five years ago, one commenter writes, "you'd have been hard-pressed to find a single Pollock reproduction within 20 square city blocks, but everyone knew at least one person who had a copy of *Christina's World* hanging somewhere on a wall."



Fig. 1.1: Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948, Tempera on panel, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

I was unsure what was happening in the image. Was this woman crying? Was she hiding? Was someone after her? Was she trying to get back to the house, or trying to escape it? I was worried that the girl or woman couldn't walk, since she looked to me a lot like Clara after she tumbles out of her chair in the Alpine Mountains in the old Shirley Temple film *Heidi*. I sensed nonetheless that she was somehow compromised, trapped, stuck. (I have since learned that my impression was not all that far off: the figure in Wyeth's painting was inspired by his neighbor Christina Olson, in Cushing, Maine, who was paralyzed from the waist down after suffering from polio as a child.) I thought the girl was possibly stranded there, and I wasn't sure if anybody would come and help. The green-gray sky was ominous, and with wind in her hair, (and far off a piece of laundry flails sideways from a clothesline), I also thought she might be Dorothy, looking back at her Kansas farmhouse just before the storm, somehow sensing that everything was about to change.

Or maybe she had just returned from Oz, plopped down from the sky back onto the prairie: no longer captive in a foreign land, but not quite home again and desperately reaching. Caught somewhere between the *nostos* and the *algos*—between the pleasure of returning home and the pain of its irretrievable loss.

Critiques of the artist’s “provincialism” would surely have been lost on me, not only, obviously, because I was just a kid, but also because Wyeth’s landscapes—of Pennsylvania and the New England Coast, the only two places he would depict in his seventy years of painting—were mine as well. (My father’s father lived on Cape Cod, so each summer I would see stretches of that tall dry grass through the window of a house not unlike the one in the painting, kind of rickety, with unpainted shingles made cracked and gray by the sea-salt air.) They were the only places I’d ever seen; they were the whole world.

But the American public loved these images for the same reasons that gave critics pause. The wide-open, half-abandoned rural spaces of Wyeth’s realism captured a particular kind of loneliness—a nostalgia for the nation’s rural past, a modern myth of origins, a pre-industrial Paradise lost. This explanation can scarcely account for my own forlorn response to Christina’s plight, but even as a child, I could not avoid the profound sense of loss embodied in this image. It made me feel lonely (although sometimes I liked feeling that way, it seemed so *adult*) like something, although I didn’t know what, was not going to last. I suppose that the painting animated for me a different kind of disappearing landscape, the secure landscape of childhood—a different, though not altogether unrelated, myth of origins. It brought into my consciousness an awareness that I couldn’t stay here forever. That muted painting on my Grandmother’s wall, of a



young girl either escaping or exiled from her home, was a poignant, almost mocking reminder of the impermeability of both childhood and home.

What is interesting to me now is that it is the figure of the *house* in this painting that gives structure and shape to both of these unifying fictions that are animated in Wyeth's painting: the myth of the nation, of the national past, and the myth of childhood. Both are cultural constructs that cannot be wrest from broader ideas of "homeplace," and both shed light on the delicate relationship between identity, memory, and history. Indeed, if all memory, collective or personal, is accessible only through narrative—those stories we tell, and are told, in order to make sense of ourselves and the world around us—my aim in each part of this project is to shed light on how these very stories are produced *by*, and profoundly impact the ways we interact *with*, cultural forms like art and literature, artifacts and commodities.

In describing the process of writing, as well as the function of narrative itself, Canadian novelist Alice Munro adopts the metaphor of the house: "Everybody knows what a house does," she explains, "how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me, and what I want my stories to do for other people."<sup>3</sup> The house, here, is not only a structure, but also a structuring agent, a trigger for imaginative expression. Similarly, when Bachelard extols the house itself as a poetic image, as a "tool for analysis of the human soul," he calls upon not only its power as an image *qua* image, but he is also attuned to the lived, subjective, experience of the space itself. Thus, it is with these meditations in mind—on the inseparable relationships between space, story, and self—that I begin this dissertation rather

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Munro, "What is Real?" in *Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories* ed. John Metcalf (Auckland: Methuen, 1982), 224.

personally, in several houses of my childhood, with my own memories of the things inside them—bottles of Sarsaparilla by the stove, a pair of enchanted lamps, a painting on a wall. I am drawn not only to the ways in which these memories are “housed,” or in Bachelard’s terms, how they are borne of and take place within intimate interior space, but also to the essential role of *objects* in these recollections. I am interested in exploring how not only spaces, but also the material objects within them, both construct and instruct our experience of the world. On both micro and macro levels, that is, in the construction of personal/private histories as well as “official” public history, how and why do we use objects to tell stories—about ourselves, our histories, our desires, our beliefs? And, most importantly, how and when do the objects themselves intervene to tell, sometimes, quite a different story?

### ***The Architecture of Longing: Project Overview***

The story I tell in this project is a story of home. It is driven by an understanding of the remarkable role that material objects can play in helping to disentangle the complex sets of meanings and values that have been attached to domestic space at various moments in American cultural history. It would be more precise, perhaps, to say that this project contains *multiple* stories about *multiple* homes; for a story about home—about how its images are created, circulated, and reproduced in twentieth-century American culture—could at once be a story about architecture and longing, nation and exile, childhood and memory, identity and real estate. It is a slippery subject.

A powerful term, “home” signals a cultural narrative with a host of competing and often contradictory meanings, values, and associations attached to it. Poet and scholar John Hollander contends, for example, that there is not a single word in the Romance languages that carries such a

powerful emotional charge as the word “home.”<sup>4</sup> It is simultaneously the stuff of poetry and the stuff of economics and finance; it is at once a private and public entity—a vessel of the most intimate memories as well as the subject of surveillance and concrete public legislation.<sup>5</sup> Advertisers too have long capitalized on mythic ideas of both house and home to sell their products, from pancakes and soap to appliances and furniture.

Consider, for example, multinational furniture giant Ikea. In 2007, the self-titled “Life Improvement Store” inaugurated a new advertising campaign reminding American consumers, in large bold print on the cover of their catalog, “Home is the Most Important Place in the World.” Another example: In 2008, amidst a plummeting housing market and nationwide consumer insecurity, Pillsbury launched a multimedia campaign entitled “Home is Calling,” in which various characters—a professional woman caught in the rain, a young boy at the library, urban commuters—amidst the chaos of everyday life need only to close their eyes and click their heels three times before being imaginatively transported to the safety of home and family, ostensibly to enjoy some crescent rolls. Indeed, the sheer pervasiveness and multivalence of the “home” in contemporary culture, its unique semantic vigor, demands a closer investigation of how and why ideas and images of home maintain such a powerful affective charge.

Book-ended by two national exhibits staged over a century apart—the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 2012 *House & Home* Exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington D.C.—this project examines the shifting values associated with ideas of “house” and “home” in American literary and cultural productions and representational forms

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<sup>4</sup> John Hollander, “It all Depends,” *Home: A Place in the World*, *Social Research* 58 (1991): 42.

<sup>5</sup> On the legislation of home across issues such as ownership, taxes, domestic violence, lawn ordinances, etc. see Lorna Fox, “The Meaning of Home: A Chimerical Concept or a Legal Challenge?” *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec, 2002): 580-610.

from the mid-nineteenth century to today. Engaging a broad range of texts and archival sources, but using American novels as my primary literary apparatus, I demonstrate that whether signifying an architectural structure, domestic space, national allegiance, or a consumer ideal, “home” is a complex, often conflicting, discursive category that is *always* inflected with particular notions of gender, race, class, and citizenship. As feminist critics from Catherine Beecher to bell hooks have known for over a century, home is of course a highly political site, and it is crucial, now as ever, to examine the roles that history and social/cultural institutions play in constituting the built environment and our relationships with it. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed multiple global migrations, voluntary or forced, that have invariably involved the loss of one home and the acquisition of another, and at a moment in which contemporary problems of housing have been thrust into national crisis of foreclosures and subprime mortgages,<sup>6</sup> this project aims at once to acknowledge *and* dismantle those mythologies of home that deem it an apolitical, universal, or secure space.

As such, each chapter in this project demonstrates how particular constructions of nostalgia, as a force that is both intellectual and affective, are materialized in various cultural products and in some ways intensified during times of rapid cultural transition and tension. In showing how that which is signified by *home* gets radically reconstructed in each of these texts and historical moments—a phenomenon that throws into question the instability of the term itself—this project closely considers how the very idea of home—as a material structure and a political fiction of national unity; as both a place and a desire—can be, and indeed has been mobilized as a powerful ideological and rhetorical tool.

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<sup>6</sup> See especially the recent Special Issue of *American Quarterly*, “Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime,” ed. Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, Vol. 64, No. 3 (September 2012): 361-683.

Consider, for example, the 2002 invocation of the “Department of Homeland Security,” initiated by the Bush Administration after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. The signifiers home and homeland are summoned here to encourage a spatialized politics of identity and belonging in which (certain) individuals become part of an imagined community—an intimate national “family” with deep historical roots.<sup>7</sup> Further, such rhetoric aims to shore up support for policies and practices that are deeply invested in justifying what Amy Kaplan calls “the cultural work of securing national borders.” While delineating a bounded and exclusionary national space, the invocation of “homeland” here also generates, paradoxically, “a kind of radical insecurity,” as Kaplan explains. Increasingly vulnerable to terrorist threats, such rhetoric presumes, the nation is a space that requires continuous sacrifice, vigilance, and protection at all costs.<sup>8</sup> National space, in this formulation is necessarily determined by racial and ethnic difference. As Gwendolyn Wright points out, “In a country still deeply ambivalent about gender and racial equality, defense of home and community can mask intolerance.”<sup>9</sup> Put simply, the sense of belonging and attachment that enables some individuals to lay claim to “home,” here, the “American” “homeland,” in fact relies on the systematic exclusion of others—such as immigrants, or, as recent headlines have made distressingly plain, young black men seen strolling through affluent suburbs—from that very place.

Straddling the interdisciplinary fields of American Studies, Material and Visual Cultural, and Literary and Cultural History, my project both engages and departs from past and

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<sup>7</sup> Attending to the ways in which the early-twentieth-century publishing industry engaged this rhetoric of a “national family” in order to interpolate a specific reading public, June Howard’s *Publishing the Family* (2001) looks closely at a multi-authored serial novel published in *Harper’s* magazine in 1907 and 1908 in order to show how emerging ideas of the middle-class home and family were being written through and constituted by mainstream media at this moment.

<sup>8</sup> See Amy Kaplan, “Homeland Insecurities: Some Reflections on Language and Space,” *Radical History Review*, Issue 85, (Winter 2003): 82-93. See also Patrick Dobel, “The Rhetorical Possibilities of “Home” in Homeland Security” *Administration & Society* Vol. 42, No. 5 (2010): 479-503.

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, “Prescribing the Model Home, *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 213.

contemporary work in these fields. Historians of nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism continue to advance scholarship showing how the discourses of home, nation, and domesticity were inextricable from the political, economic, and cultural movements of empire. In addition, wide-ranging scholarship on nineteenth- and early-twentieth century sentimental fiction has played a key role in revealing the ways in which race and gender discourses are encoded into narratives of the allegedly “private” space of the home. Within this scholarship, however, the ambiguous dimensions of “home” as both metaphor *and* materiality, remains unchallenged. Further, although scholars have shown how literary and cultural texts embody numerous modes of shaping the (national, gender, or racial) identity of subjects, far less critical effort has been given to the role of social space and material culture in these processes. To address these gaps, my project combines the tools of spatial analysis with material culture analysis and literary critical methodologies in order to argue that the ubiquity of home in twentieth-century American cultural texts works to obscure the social relations and political negotiations that *produce* this space along with the insistent desire to attain or achieve it. Drawing from and amending well-documented histories that trace the origins and modern development of mass consumption and consumer subjectivity, my project maps the discursive and affective processes by which home and commodities came to be identified as sites of individual expression and national identification.

### *A House is not a Home*

In collecting and analyzing the materials within this project, I repeatedly came up against what seems to be a structural and paradoxical conflation between house and home that cannot be completely collapsed. For example, within the sense of security and freedom that individuals

associate with houses and home-ownership in American myth and culture, there is a strong conviction that these “private” spaces are, or at least could be, an *actual* site of self-fulfillment; the house, in other words, is imagined as a site wherein that longed-for sense of ontological security, the elusive “sense of home,” might finally be obtained. In trying to locate this yearning—to project an existential desire for structure onto an actual structure—the house, it seems, always betrays the yearning itself. While houses are surely commodities, and individuals may spend time and money furnishing and personalizing them, the phenomenon of home itself cannot be commoditized, despite myriad attempts within popular media and advertising to do so. I will return to this problem between desire and its object in later chapters, but it is important to note here that the relationship between house and home is in fact more complicated than the structure versus sentiment distinction I have just described.

What is this distinction, then, between house and home? Unlike in the German language, for example, which has several words that help to unravel the complex idea—*Haus*, signifying the physical house; *heim*, meaning home in the literal sense of the individual or private household; and *heimat*, referring to home in the collective sense of homeland or nation—the terms are often used interchangeably in the English language. (English, of course, has “home,” “house,” and “homeland”—but in many instances, “home” comes to stand in for all three.) When the terms “house” and “home” are separated in English, most often the house denotes a physical structure, while *home* denotes either an institution or a feeling—such as “I *feel* at home here.” Architectural critic Kim Dovey echoes this explanation of the distinction between the two terms: “Although a house is an object, part of the environment, home is best conceived of as a kind of relationship

between people and their environment (...) It is an emotionally based and meaningful relationship between dwellers and their dwelling places.”<sup>10</sup>

While the phenomenological approach to the experience and symbolism of home in Dovey’s larger study is rich and insightful, his evaluation of the house itself falls short here, for even if the word and image of “home” adopts an emotional timbre that perhaps the physical house does not, to assert that the difference between the two is one simply of materiality vs. non-materiality is also to miss the huge symbolism of the *house* itself, in particular the detached single-family house, in American culture.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, aside from its physical reality, the house is also a mythic image, a symbol that carries with it a strong affective charge and a host of assumptions and cultural narratives: narratives about morality, self-reliance, nature, democracy, class aspirations, and so on. Architect Robert Stern, for example, in stating that, “When you’re talking about building a house, you’re talking about building dreams,” has indeed framed his professional practice around these mythic ideas surrounding the house.<sup>12</sup>

Bachelard takes this notion a step further in his celebratory tome about the “poetic depth of the space of the house,” when he asserts that humans in fact *need* houses in order to dream. With this in mind, I emphatically echo Diana Fuss’ assertion in *The Sense of an Interior* (2004), an investigation of the intimate relationship between built and literary forms, that “to attribute

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<sup>10</sup> Kim Dovey, “Home and Homelessness,” in Irwin Altman and Carol M. Werner, *Home Environments* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 33.

<sup>11</sup> In discussing the problematic implications of this house/home within legally-binding definitions of “home,” Lorna Fox O’Mahony explains: “Cross-disciplinary scholarship on the meaning and values of home to occupiers -as a social, psychological, cultural and emotional phenomenon -has not penetrated the legal domain, where the proposition that home can encapsulate meanings beyond the physical structure of the house, or the capital value it represents, continues to present conceptual difficulties.” in “The Idea of Home in Law,” *Home Cultures* Vol. 2, No. 1 (2005): 1.

<sup>12</sup> In this, Stern is echoing an assertion made by Le Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture*: “The business of Architecture is to establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials” (London: The Architectural Press, 1946), 10-11.



substance and materiality to architecture, and imagination and metaphor to literature, misreads both artistic forms.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, just as with the idea of *home*, the structure of the freestanding *house* has a deep history as an archetypal image in a wide range of cultural products.

In both “high-brow” and popular American literature, for example, there are myriad myth-making texts that center on the image of the house.<sup>14</sup> This vast archive could include canonical texts like Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), or Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), which each exalt the benefits of the house in uplifting the moral and spiritual virtues of the nation and its citizens. Other American literary texts, on the other hand, use the image of the house to decry the nation’s plunge into materialism, first from within the industrializing city, as in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905), and then to its outskirts, as in the grand “West Egg” mansion as in F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). A haven or sanctuary for some, other literary houses *haunt* their occupants, as in Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) or Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000). Further, acknowledging the gender and racial privilege implicit in the American home ideal, for the protagonists of other novels—from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) to James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), from Sandra

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<sup>13</sup> Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Not only are many novels named after houses, the house is frequently a central character which functions, as Marilyn Chandler points out, as “a unifying symbolic structure that represents and defines the relationship of the central characters to one another, to themselves to the world,” in *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1. Similarly, Marjorie Garber, in *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses*, also highlights the “falling in love with houses” trope that endures in contemporary culture as well as in older Western literature: “We might think of these stories as morality tales about our own materialist culture,” she writes, “but falling in love with a house is something that happens quite a lot in older literature...and it is not always easy to tell where the beloved object leaves off and the person begins” (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 30.

Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1983) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—the structure of the house is both confining and oppressive.

The house, as a cultural agent in its own right, figures as well in nonliterary cultural products. Who can forget the Bates Mansion in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), terrifying in its enormity and emptiness; or the desolate Cape Cod cottage of an Edward Hopper painting, standing motionless by the sea and impervious to change? As a child of the 1980s, I can still remember clearly the dream of childhood independence that quickly became the nightmare of an empty and unsupervised house in *Home Alone* (1990), or the illustrious Barbie Dream House® with a swimming pool and its own backyard grill—a hetero-familial fantasy of pink plastic suburban bliss.

The divergence between house and home, their different resonances and textures, might well be conveniently collapsed into a discussion of the distinction between another frequently conflated semantic pair: *place* and *space*. For example, the platitude “to make a house a home,” (a favorite advertising slogan that appears in domestic manuals of the mid-nineteenth century, such as Catherine Beecher's 1869 *American Woman's Home* to contemporary design and “lifestyle” magazines—such as *Dwell*, *House Beautiful*, or Martha Stewart's *Living*—depicts a process by which an individual makes a space “his or her own.” In other words, the transformation involves turning empty or impersonal *space* into a *place*—giving it a history, filling it with *your* things, possessing it, and, with time, imagining it as a “mirror of self,”<sup>15</sup> a container of and for your memories.<sup>16</sup> To

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<sup>15</sup> Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Berkeley, California: Conari Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Theodor Adorno (2005) has suggested that the flurry of interest in home-decorating indicated by the popularity of such magazines suggests (along with other facets of the “home industry” such as contemporary home-improvement television shows) is a reaction to the impossibility of being “at home” in the modern home wherein “dwelling, in the proper sense, is no longer possible.” Modern homes, he writes are “living-

make a house a home, then, is also to evoke a house's narrative power—its ability to tell a story about its inhabitants; to display (or expose) their class, their specific tastes, their inner lives. Often, however, the idea of “house” is subsumed within the broader concept of home, only adding to that term's conceptual baggage.

### ***The Trouble with Home: Keywords, Methodology, and the Matter of Things***

The term “home” is referred to and defined differently across academic disciplines and, particularly in the last two decades, it has increasingly become the subject of growing interdisciplinary inquiry.<sup>17</sup> This body of literature is vast, emerging from multiple, often intersecting fields that come into contact with American Studies, including, but certainly not limited to phenomenology; architecture; visual and material culture; literary and cultural history, gender studies and feminist theory; cultural theory; and consumption and media studies.

Martin Heidegger's notion of dwelling, as outlined in *Being and Time* (1962), is a crucial concept that undergirds studies of home in the fields of philosophy and phenomenology, wherein a psychological attachment to a particular place is a fundamental component of human existence. For Heidegger, the process of building encompasses not only the process of erecting a structure to

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cases manufactured by experts for philistines, or factory sties that have strayed into the consumption sphere, devoid of all relations to the occupant.” Suggesting the impossibility of such spaces to be true reflections the individuality of its occupants, they are driven instead to “take an interest in furniture design or interior decoration” as an effort to mask its ultimate emptiness. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1974), 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> Prominent scholarly volumes on the subject include Amy Blunt and Robyn Dowling *Home* (New York: Routledge, 2006); David Morley *Home Territories: Media, Territory, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Irene Cieraad *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey *Ideal homes?: Social Change and Domestic Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996); David Benjamin, David Stea, and Eje Arén, *The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments* (Brookfield VT: Avebury, 1995); and Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking Press, 1986). In addition, in 2004, Bloomsbury Publishing launched the interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal, *Home Cultures*.

meet our physical needs of shelter, but it also provides an existential structure whereby individuals construct meaning, establish their own sense of place, of being “at home” in the world. Dwelling, in this sense, is ability to cultivate a spiritual unity between humans and things, and the home, in both its physical and psychic constructions, is the primary location of this subject-object unification.<sup>18</sup>

French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard looks further at notions of dwelling and space, paying close attention to how individuals self-identify with the house, its particular spaces and objects, and how these attachments have been represented in poetry and literature. Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, with which this Introduction begins, was a pioneering text in phenomenological considerations of home as a “felicitous space,” inspiring, for example, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s conception of “topophilia” (1977) or “the affective bond between people and place.”<sup>19</sup> In Tuan’s words, topophilia “manifests itself most often in attachment to home places, places that vary in scale from the nation to the bedroom.”<sup>20</sup> The work of each of these theorists is foundational in contemporary discussions of the relationship between the physical and existential structure of home and dwelling, and each, to varying degrees, focus on the ways conceptions of home offer a place of refuge, material or spiritual, from the pressures and anxieties of the outside world.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962). See also his essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking”: “The real plight of dwelling [far from being a shortage of houses] lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell” (1971:161). For further discussion of Heidegger’s theory of place, dwelling and being, see David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 299-302.

<sup>19</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). On these psychosocial processes of place-attachment, see also Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> James Duncan and Nancy Duncan, “Sense of Place as a Positional Good” in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* ed. Paul Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen Till (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 41.

At its core, Bachelard's *Poetics* is concerned with, indeed celebrates, the power of myth and, relatedly, of mythic (or what he calls "primal") images, such as that of home, or the "oneiric" house. Such myths and images appear to be universal in Bachelard's formulation: He writes, "One has only to experience it to realize that there exists throughout the whole wide world, among people of the most diverse cultures, an archetypal home."<sup>21</sup> His analysis thus fails to acknowledge that these images are, in fact, socially produced, each with its own specific cultural and historical lineages.

Further, while useful in helping to understand psychological and emotional investments in places, this work also tends to universalize the experience of home while neglecting the political dimensions of domestic space—an omission that has undergone intense criticism from feminist scholars who rightly assert that the privileging of these images and narratives of home—as a site of comfort, protection, stability—in fact obscures the fact that notions of "home" have historically been used to sustain unequal gender, race, and class relations. Far from being a sanctuary of comfort, protection, and stability, home, for many, the home has instead been a site of exploitation, fear, and violence.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, feminist theory and queer of color critiques have been pivotal in destabilizing the white hetero-familial mythologies of home, demonstrating that for many individuals and groups the illusion of home, as a site of intimacy and protection, has been based on the exclusion of specific histories of violence, oppression, and resistance.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gaston Bachelard, "Reverie and Radio" in *Radiotext(e)*, ed. Neil Strauss (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993), 220.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example Doreen Massey "A Place Called Home" in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> See Allison Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora Anglo-Indian Women and the Spatial Politics of Home* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The notions of place-attachment and “topophilia,” so crucial to Bachelard and Tuan, are also problematic when considering “home” and the politics of location from the perspective of U.S. Empire, postcolonial, and diaspora studies. The work of cultural historians of nineteenth century U.S. and British imperialism, such as Amy Kaplan, June Howard, Anne McClintock, and Laura Wexler, considers how discourses of home, nation, and domesticity have been inextricably bound to the political, economic, and cultural movements of empire in what Kaplan has labeled “Manifest Domesticity.” Along with wide-ranging literary historical scholarship, particularly the critical reevaluations of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sentimental or domestic fiction that began in the 1970s, and remain lively to this day,<sup>24</sup> this work reveals the profound ways in which national discourses on race and gender are encoded into narratives of the allegedly “private” space of the home. In a related vein, scholars in postcolonial, (im)migrant, and diaspora studies investigate the trope of home in order to complicate ideas of nostalgia—as a longing for an

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<sup>24</sup> Ann Douglas gave serious consideration to nineteenth-century domestic fiction in *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977). Although she chastised the genre for its “debased religiosity,” and lamented the effect it had on the “sentimental” values associated with women throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, her attention to the critical cultural and historical importance of these texts initiated a flurry of critical literature on the subject, from feminist literary critics in particular who maintained the important cultural work that this work performed. See, for example, Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1981); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Drawing from and expanding this work, more recent scholars consider *sentimentalism* as a cultural and literary practice. For example, Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) argues that beyond such discourses of aesthetic value, domestic fiction and the sentimental mode it deployed was a literary practice as well as a political strategy used to create communities of racial uplift and social protest. For further work on how the sentimental mode is invested not only in ideas of gender, but also of race and class, see Shirley Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” in *American Literary History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1999); and Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

imagined or geographical homeland—and to challenge and critique the very idea of fixed origins.<sup>25</sup> “When is the word ‘home’ shrunk to denote the private domestic sphere,” asks Rosemary Marangoly George (1999) in her investigation of twentieth-century diasporic fiction, “and when is the domestic enlarged to denote the affairs of a nation?”<sup>26</sup> Each of these bodies of literature demonstrates that the definition and experience of “home” varies widely, depending on where they stand not only physically and psychologically, but also geopolitically.

### **Things**

In cultural studies and humanities scholarship, Raymond Williams devised the concept of *Keywords* to refer to significant and ideologically-charged terms which he perceived to be vital in understanding the formation of culture and society (both themselves “Keywords” in Williams’ text) at a given moment. In his pioneering volume *Keywords: A Vocabulary for Culture and Society* (1976), Williams identifies 110 such words, each with a brief essay that historicizes and synthesizes the complex, and often controversial, ideas embedded within each term. It is only recently that “home” has been added to a *Keywords* collection, although many of the terms from which discourses of the home cannot wrest themselves—“domestic,” “privacy,” “nation,” “family,” “sentimentality”—are staples in such volumes across the humanities and social sciences.<sup>27</sup> “Home” appears as a keyword

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<sup>25</sup> Prominent in this literature, for example, are Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>27</sup> In his original *Keywords* volume (1976), Williams included “family,” “country,” and “private.” Recent examples of volumes drawing from and adding to Williams’ model include: *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, ed. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, Meaghan Morris, and Raymond

in the 2005 volume, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), and is contextualized by sociologist Tony Bennett as a multidirectional and multi-layered space. Bennett's essay is particularly useful for my purposes here because it touches on each of the three axes of home I outlined above: space, affect, and commodity.

Home implies both rest and settlement, and movement. Home is the place from which things originate [hometown, home country] and to which they return, or—where movement is blocked—a place of imagined return. It is a place of belonging, involving a sense of family, intimacy, or affinity amongst those who live close to each other, surrounded by movement. It is a place to which others come when we are at home to receive them and a place from which things flow to others: for colonial administrations, instructions, like parcels for migrants, always came from home. Home can also be found at the other end of travel and movement—a home away from home, or, in colonial histories, a home planted in another's land, as in home station. And home can be a beckoning destination, a place of final rest and return.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, Bennett's brief essay acknowledges the particularly *gendered* connotations that the symbol of the home acquired in the nineteenth century, where middle-class domestic life was romanticized and sanctified as a uniquely feminized sphere, in direct contrast with the masculine world of work and public life. While I unpack this gendered bifurcation at greater length below, I would first like to highlight a brief but provocative passage in Bennett's essay on "home" as a keyword. "It is at home," he writes, "that *things are properly themselves*, where a person's *true identity* resides" (emphasis mine). Whether intentional or not, Bennett's personification of *things* in relation to the home is crucial here. Not only is home a place where objects can allegedly *be themselves*, but Bennett also suggests that "to take things home is to make them safe, to take them

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Williams (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), which includes, along with "home," the terms "everyday," "family," "nation," "private," and "public." A 2007 volume, *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* includes "domestic," "family," "nation," "interiority," "public," and "sentiment."

<sup>28</sup> Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).



out of circulation.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, to [purchase] them is to *rescue* them, to take them out of the drudgery and impersonality of the marketplace. Curiously, this language echoes the same “separate spheres” language that in part constructed the romantic idea of home as a “private” refuge, or a “haven in a heartless world,” as Christopher Lasch describes it. *Things*, in this view, are inherently vulnerable, in need of rescue and liberation from the unstable “public” world of commodity production. Despite its potential theoretical richness, in evoking the connection between space, objects, and subjectivity (it is at *home*, that the “true identities” of both things and individuals reside), this moment in Bennett’s essay instead remains otherwise isolated and uninterrogated.

Extending material culture scholar Bill Brown’s assertion that we use material and literary objects to “make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate fears and shape our fantasies,” it is through a sustained investigation of singular domestic objects in each chapter that I begin to trace an emotional economy of the home.<sup>30</sup> In order to map the discursive and *affective* processes by which home and commodities came to be identified as sites of individual expression and national identification, I also draw from and amend well-documented histories that trace the origins and modern development of mass consumption and consumer subjectivity.<sup>31</sup> To highlight the role of advertising, display, and the rise of consumer

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<sup>29</sup> Tony Bennett, *Keywords*, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4. See also Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Daniel Miller, *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001); David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); and Irene Cieraad, *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> These foundational texts include: Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); T. J. Jackson Lears *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); and David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press,

society in Americans' changing relationship with home, space, technology and objects, for example, I look to the work of Jackson Lears, Roland Marchand, William Leach, and David Nye, each scholars who focus on the importance of the *visual* in the rise of a new consumerism around the turn of the century, and its powerful transformations throughout the twentieth century and into our own. In addition, each focusing on specific moments in American consumer history, the work of Kristin Hoganson (1865-1920), Lizabeth Cohen (post-1945), and Elaine Tyler May (the 1950s) consider the gendered practices of domestic consumption and the role of the home as a locus of state-sanctioned consumer activity.

In showing that the complex emotional investment individuals place on *home* and domestic objects is informed by, but cannot be completely reduced to, the logic of consumer capitalism, I argue in part that the gradual dominance of the commodity within domestic space, along with the sentimental investments attached to these objects, helps to create and sustain what I see as an ultimately irresolvable dialectic between house and home. In other words, I use material culture both to ground my analysis and to propel my argument that the very *idea* of home, its status as a sacred and timeless institution, is a social and historical construct that has as much to do with changing notions of the family and ideologies of national belonging as it does with the marketing of consumer products. In each chapter I consider how objects, commodities, and technologies in the home have both echoed and transformed the tenuous discourse of public and private space at various moments throughout American cultural history. To underscore the sheer ubiquity of ideas and images in twentieth and twenty-first century American cultural discourse, the materials I engage throughout *The Architecture of Longing* draw from a range of scholarly disciplines and cover a

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1990) and *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).

vast terrain; they include novels, film, cultural criticism, magazine and television advertisements, and museum exhibitions. Along with these key sites, the reader will also find that central to this project's analysis are specific objects: clothing and a porcelain doll (Chapter Two); a lamp (Chapter Three); a television set (Chapter Four); and a vast assortment of domestic objects, from the butter churn to the Slinky (Chapter Five).

“If the history *of* things can be understood as their circulation, the commodity's ‘social life’ through diverse cultural fields,” writes Bill Brown, “then the history *in* things might be understood as the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object.”<sup>32</sup> While my focus on individual objects in each chapter provides a point of entry into a larger discussion of home, in showing that the stories contained *within* these objects have a powerful extradomestic reach, the already unstable divisions between private and public, memory and history, domestic and foreign—divisions on which the creation and reproduction of ideologies of “home” relies—begin to dissolve even further.

### ***Chapter Summaries***

Chapter Two, “Nostalgia in the Dream City: Reconstructing the Heartland in *Sister Carrie* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*,” is situated in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century urban America, amid its explosion of consumer capitalism, the beginnings of a nascent culture industry, as well as the proliferation of modern advertising techniques and a developing aesthetic of public display. My narrative begins here because it is within this moment, as numerous cultural historians have elaborated, that we can begin to trace the emergence and historical development of an

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<sup>32</sup> Bill Brown, “How to do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 4 (Summer 1998): 935.

American mass consumer culture.<sup>33</sup> This chapter brings together two pioneering but disparate texts, both published in 1900: Theodore Dreiser's realist novel *Sister Carrie* and L. Frank Baum's children's tale *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The city of Chicago was formative to the lives and careers of both Baum and Dreiser, and while the authors may never have met, their paths certainly crossed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Looking at the ways *home* imagery circulated at the World's Fair—a "place of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish," as Walter Benjamin famously refers to World's Exhibitions—these representations are then read alongside the Fair's fictional counterpart in Baum's Oz (The Emerald City), as well as the vast retail spaces that so insatiably pique consumer desire in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. My reading highlights the ways in which these fictional spaces, and the very real spaces on which they are modeled, embody and sublimate widely shared anxieties surrounding gender, industrialization, immigration and national identity in turn-of-the-century America. In looking at the ways in which the narrative journeys of Dreiser and Baum's protagonists, Carrie Meeber and Dorothy Gale, intersect in specific places, spaces, and historical moments, my reading of *Sister Carrie* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* demonstrates the ways in which these authors concurrently wrestle with notions of "home" at a historical moment when the idea itself, as a trope for the desire to belong *and* as a symbol of national unity, is undergoing profound restructuring.

For neither protagonist is the home associated with its familiar iterations of haven, security, or family, but, strangely, they each enact a specific type of nostalgia nonetheless—a nostalgia that is animated by a desire for particular objects. In the case of Baum's Oz, for example, many critics have taken Dorothy's confounding nostalgia as evidence of the author's Populist sympathies, and

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<sup>33</sup> See Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

because of her quickness in refusing the commercial and sensual pleasures of the Emerald City, others have also located within this narrative a critique of commodity culture. Against these readings, I highlight instead the material desire that Baum's protagonist develops in a region of Oz called "The Dainty China Country." Here, Dorothy's nostalgia undergoes a strange transition as she develops an admiration of and desire for decorative objects.

Dorothy has desired nothing at all (except to return to Kansas) until this point in the narrative, but now, having fallen in love with a completely useless object—a souvenir, a *tchotchke*, an item with no function outside the realm of display—it is here, I argue, amongst what Baum labels the "China People," that she becomes a symbol of the "American" ideal of domesticity wherein the ideal occupation of middle-class women was often considered to be the purchase and display of domestic objects that would elevate and/or confirm their social status and that of their families. It is through her ability to manage the objects of her home space, whether directly or indirectly, that the American woman is able to pursue "the process of domestication," which Amy Kaplan notes, "entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien."<sup>34</sup> But while this interaction might enable her to become a "proper" American, fulfilling a script of white, middle-class, domesticity, it might also highlight the way foreign influences and commodities profoundly inflected these notions of American domesticity. Here, I draw from Kristen Hoganson's argument in *Consumer's Imperium* (2007) that in discussions of the United States in the world at the turn of the century, the wholesale privileging of "Americanization of the world" arguments work to "deflecting attention from the globalization of the US."<sup>35</sup> Dorothy's encounter with this object

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<sup>34</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Kristin Hoganson, *Consumer's Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 10.

productively complicates her insufferable nostalgia, and critically shifts its trajectory, for two reasons: First, from this point on, the home she is imagining is not fixed in the past, it's based on what that home could *become*. Second, this home that Dorothy begins to imagine is distinctly *cosmopolitan* in character, it relies on a global consumer market, thereby highlighting the *intranational* dimension of the "American" home, for rather than imposing rigid ideals of US domesticity outward, she wishes to bring the world into her own home. While many readings of Baum's text interpret it as a glorification of the pastoral and the family farm—readings that attempt to "fix" the identity of *place*, in particular of the home and the nation—Dorothy's desire to bring this foreign object home and to display it as a souvenir, enables the house instead to become a site of *movement*, of eventual progress, rather than stasis. Further, I argue that her longing to bring this trinket back to Kansas as an item of domestic display indicates her willing participation in, rather than refusal of, an explicitly *imperial* system of consumption.

While Chapter Two looks primarily at fashion and ornamental objects, the objects I centralize in Chapters Three and Four are technological in nature. My focus on the role of technology, light, and particularly electricity in the formation of American selfhood will engage the work of cultural historian David Nye,<sup>36</sup> specifically his revisiting of Perry Miller's notion of the "technological sublime"<sup>37</sup> as crucial to a history of national subjecthood. In discussing the social

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<sup>36</sup> These texts include: *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); and *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> In *The American Technological Sublime*, Nye defines the sublime as an experience of both awe and terror, "an essentially religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects" such as landscapes, natural wonders, buildings, or machines (xiii). The "American technological sublime" refers, then, to a

function of technology, Nye also explores the relationship between stories and material objects in a way that appeals to my interest in the complex relationship between narratives and objects. “Technologies are part of a dialogue between human beings about their differing perceptions,” he explains. “This dialogue takes the form of narratives, different stories we tell each other to make sense of the transformations that accompany the adoption of new machines.”<sup>38</sup> While the work of both Dreiser and Baum deals explicitly with changes in material culture taking place in turn-of-the-century American life, they also highlight in particular the public ambivalence surrounding the vast transformations in technology, specifically electric technology, and its impact on both individual and social formations (the human body and the social body).<sup>39</sup> Baum biographer Russell Nye maintains that the author “Grafted 20<sup>th</sup> century technology to the fairy tale tradition.”<sup>40</sup> The specter of electricity, as an invisible force, is everywhere in Baum’s Oz, “[finding] expression, as Vivian White explains, “in the magic that pervades the country,” but made most explicit perhaps in the powering of the machines in the Emerald City, a premonition of Ford’s assembly line.<sup>41</sup>

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sense of national unity that emerges from the collective witnessing of large-scale applications of technological prowess.

<sup>38</sup> David Nye, *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>39</sup> In 1901, a year after publishing the first Oz tale, Baum published a short novella, entitled *The Master Key*, in which the author meditates on the vast potentials, as well as the dangers, of electrical technology. The main character, a young boy named Rob, is fascinated by the new science of electricity, spending most of his time in his attic workshop conducting experiments and tinkering with gadgets and wires. During one of these experiments, he accidentally summons the Demon of Electricity, who bestows upon the boy nine electrical gifts to bestow onto the world. Among these offerings are small “electrically concentrated” food tablets, an anti-gravity flying device shaped like a watch, and a “record of events” screen that bears a remarkable resemblance to today’s iPad. After a series of misadventures wherein Rob flies to distant lands and intervenes in foreign affairs, he returns the items to the Demon, deciding that the world is not ready or able to harness these gifts. The lesson: Despite its potentially redemptive power, technology, if used irresponsibly, might also be the destroyer of civilization.

<sup>40</sup> Russell Nye, “An Appreciation,” forward to *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 168.

<sup>41</sup> Vivian White, “Unsettling Oz: Technological Anxieties in the Novels of L. Frank Baum,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 1 (2006): 30.

Similarly in drawing attention to the language of circuitry and electrification inflecting representations of the modern city as well as new conceptions of the body—both concerned with the regulation of various energies and desires—Tim Armstrong notes that *Sister Carrie* is a text that marks the transition between two systems: “the old system—based on flame, and the new electrical technology.”<sup>42</sup>

Chapter Three, “The Sheer Genius of the Electric Chandelier”: The Lamp and the Promise of Home in Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* is situated at just this impasse. In reading Steven Millhauser’s 1996 novel *Martin Dressler*, which takes place at the same turn-of-the-century moment in which Baum and Dreiser write, this chapter looks closely at representations of the lamps, both gas-fueled and electric/incandescent, in order to highlight the complex meanings encased within these material objects throughout the twentieth century and into our own. Although Millhauser’s contemporary postmodern novel, taking place during the turn-of-the-century boom of American invention and industry, aims to engage a distinctly “national” narrative, my reading of this text is strengthened by Walter Benjamin’s method of historical materialism that he outlines in *The Arcades Project* (1999). With a strong focus on the historical narratives embedded within material objects, both authors look closely at the detritus of the past and both place their narrative frame within an emerging world of commodities. In describing the semi-public domestic site of the hotel, Steven Millhauser is diligent in specifying how each space in the text is illuminated, where gaslight is associated most strongly with women, sex, private interior rooms, and sites of childhood memory—and electric light is associated with public spaces, the nation, sites of progress and development. Then, buttressing my argument with images of the lamp

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<sup>42</sup> Tim Armstrong, “The Electrification of the Body at the Turn of the Century,” *Textual Practice* 5, no. 3 (1991): 309.



in modern advertising and visual art, including early-century General Electric ads for the incandescent light bulb, annual calendars commissioned by popular American painter Maxfield Parrish, and a 2007 television advertisement for Ikea, this chapter demonstrates the ways in which domestic commodities are imbued, even *burdened*, with the responsibility of expressing ambivalent sentiments towards the old and the new, tradition and technology, nostalgia and progress.

As David Nye further explains in *Narratives and Spaces* (1997), the stories we tell of and about technology may “focus on an older world that is fading into the past (...) or they may engage the future, projecting utopian visions of ease and abundance, as was the case with the New York World’s Fair of 1939.”<sup>43</sup> Chapter Four, “From Screen to Shining Screen: The Wizard of Oz in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” begins here, at the 1939 World’s Fair in Flushing, Queens, where, along with a slew of other technological marvels and consumer products, the commercial television was first introduced to the American public. This year also witnessed the release of the popular film adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s 1900 tale, *The Wizard of Oz*. Despite the fact that this film was initially met with tepid reviews, even scathing at times, this chapter explores the cultural processes by which it acquired its contemporary status as American icon—Judy Garland’s now-beloved ode to home and family. In looking closely at the surge in popularity that Victor Fleming’s 1939 MGM film adaptation of *Oz* received in 1956, after its nationally televised premiere, my analysis explores the changing discourses surrounding, and attachments to, the idea of “home” at particular moments throughout the twentieth-century. In what ways, for example, might the idea of *home* resonate differently for viewers of its original release, just days before the eruption of the Second World War, than it did for the subsequent television audience, for whom the idea and rhetoric of *home* (as national belonging), something that needed protecting, was deployed as an

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<sup>43</sup> David Nye, *Narratives and Spaces*, 3.

ideological tactic used to bolster U.S. morale, both at home and abroad. In 1956, the *Oz* story promoted a nostalgic attachment to home, family, and an attachment to place at the very moment in which forces such as media technology, heightened consumerism, and suburbanization were redefining and/or posing a threat to these “traditional” institutions.

The second part of this analysis, then, looks not at the text itself, but rather at the shifting modes and spaces of its transmission—as the site of the film’s reception moved from the public space of the theater to the allegedly “private” site of the home. As with each chapter in this project, in order to frame this inquiry part of my analysis here centers on a single domestic object, the television, as both a medium and material object that was becoming increasingly ubiquitous in postwar American homes. This method offers a unique lens through which we can see how mapping the cultural life of *Oz*, in this case, also enables us to tell a story of the shifting cultural values and ideologies that get incorporated into the symbol/space of “home.” Using this reading practice, I suggest that it was in no small part the domestic television—both the object itself and the cultural practices surrounding it—that would eventually catapult “*The Wizard of Oz*” into its contemporary role as a timeless “classic,” an event, and a collective ritual of civic performance. Navigating between text and context, I argue that just as the widespread invasion of the television into domestic space played a fundamental role in redefining the American home, it also necessarily altered the very meanings and messages of *The Wizard of Oz* itself.

Rather than focusing on a single domestic object, the final chapter, “A Country’s Attic: The Story of Stuff at the National Building Museum’s 2012 House & Home Exhibit,” considers an immense assortment of domestic objects in the context of a contemporary museum display. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the *House & Home* exhibit at the National Building

Museum in Washington D.C. which opened to the public in April 2012. Specifically, my reading of this site engages two of the five gallery spaces within this exhibition: The first, entitled *Living at Home*, consists of an eclectic, non-chronological display of nearly two hundred domestic objects which a reviewer in *The Atlantic* has labeled “sentimental, random, and amusing;” and the second, entitled *Home Economics*, consists of a detailed timeline, spanning from the Colonial Era to the present, that illustrates a history of housing in America. My analysis shows that these galleries rely on each other to show that the very *idea* of home, its status as a sacred and timeless institution, is a social and historical construct that has as much to do with changing notions of the family and ideologies of citizenship as it does with the marketing of consumer products. In looking at the critical literature surrounding the exhibit, however, I argue that these associations are too easily elided, not necessarily because of the design and reach of the overall exhibit, but because of the immediate affective power of objects themselves—a power that can function to obscure their analytic value. The objects within this exhibit are both celebrated for their facile ability to amuse, and condemned for their lack of substance. How and why, I ask, does the power of the domestic objects within this gallery, in particular their *appeal to sentiment*, overwhelm this critical work? How might representations of domestic material culture work to conceal, or obscure the histories of structural exclusion that are detailed in *House & Home*’s less prominently featured timeline?

Ultimately, my reading of domestic commodities in various avenues of twentieth-century American popular culture approaches the larger question of how the nostalgic longing for “home” as an idea/ideal is both an individual psychological construction and one that is discursively shaped by larger ideological and commercial forces. Further, considering how the categories of gender, race and sexuality have been used to define and defy notions of citizenship at particular

moments, my project asks which individuals and groups come to be included, protected, and celebrated within these discourses of home. Beyond its contribution to dialogs in U.S. cultural history and literature, then, this project opens up an important area of inquiry that acknowledges both the material *and* symbolic geographies in which individual and national identities are formed. Outlining a phenomenological and affective history of home, nostalgia, and domestic objects, this unique research deepens, and perhaps transforms, our understanding of twentieth and twenty-first century expressive culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### Nostalgia in the Dream City:

#### Reconstructing the Heartland in *Sister Carrie* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world, than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it. To those who have never experienced the beneficent influence of its delightful seclusion, no words can make clear the power whereby it uplifts. To those who have never found in it the tolerance and love which are chief among its constituents, the song and the literature of the home are dulled. They will not understand wherefore the tear springs glistening to the eyelids at some strange breath in lovely music. The mystic chords which bind and thrill the heart of the nation they will never know.

~Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home.

~L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

“To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled,” writes Theodore Dreiser in *Sister Carrie* (1900), “The approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing.” In an opening scene of this novel, eighteen-year-old Carrie Meeber is aboard a Chicago-bound train, watching the tiny Wisconsin village of her birth become smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing behind the glass window of the locomotive. With just a fleeting “touch of regret,” but for the most part indifferent about leaving her childhood home and family, as she approaches the outskirts of Chicago Carrie turns her gaze longingly forward, towards the future and the city, and in a daydream she imagines the new selves that this wondrous city, with its

ceaseless and alluring pleasures, might help her to become. As Chicago loomed nearer, writes Dreiser, “the threads which bound [Carrie] so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken.”<sup>1</sup>

Somewhere not far off but a world away (over the rainbow, perhaps), in an equally pioneering work of fiction published in the same year, another small-town girl embarks on a journey strangely paralleling that of Dreiser’s protagonist.<sup>2</sup> Like Carrie, this youthful wanderer also leaves her home and family behind in a Mid-western prairie town, setting forth towards a “great city” that “gleams of a thousand lights.”<sup>3</sup> That child is Dorothy Gale, and the city, inspired both by the rapidly industrializing city of Chicago and the wild imagination of Lyman Frank Baum, was the Emerald City—a mindfully guarded metropolis smack in the center of Oz.

Though the circumstances of the two protagonists’ departures were vastly different, as were their sentiments about leaving—with Carrie eager to escape the “burden of toil” that her provincial hometown had come to represent, and Dorothy desperate to return back to Kansas from the very start of her involuntary journey to Oz—the dull and relatively minimal descriptions of their ordinary home places share remarkable similarities.<sup>4</sup> Baum, for instance, devotes only a few minor paragraphs in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (three of the book’s 261 pages), to a description of the place for which Dorothy longs so poignantly throughout the entire fairy tale. In the brief description Baum does offer of Dorothy’s Kansas, both the home and its surrounding landscape is

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that while the texts were published in the same year, 1900, Carrie’s journey to Chicago in the novel takes place in 1889.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Both narratives emerge from America’s “heartland,” as the title suggests. *The Dictionary of Human Geography* explains these “core regions” as such: “The Midwest of the USA is often termed ‘the Heartland,’ with the implication that it is not only central in a geographical sense but also foundational in a normative sense, the place where the core American values that come from the frontier process are to be found” (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 326.

bleak and awash in an unforgiving grayness. “Even the grass was not green,” the reader quickly learns, “for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere.”<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser divulges even less about his protagonist’s roots, and any trace of an emotional attachment to Carrie’s childhood home as she is plugging towards Chicago on the train (a “gush of tears at her mother’s farewell kiss, a touch in the throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by day”) is fleeting and “certainly not for advantages now being given up.”<sup>6</sup> In noting the tensions between the physical house and the “spirit” of home in Dreiser’s fiction (the “lovely home atmosphere,” for example, to which the author bestows such awkward praise in this chapter’s epigraph,) Catherine Jurca offers a connection between the author’s literary work and the real-life struggles of his upbringing: “It is both surprising and fitting,” she writes, “that Dreiser, who had more than an imaginative relation to poverty, should be the first and one of only a few novelists to connect spiritual homelessness and material houselessness.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in both works of fiction, it is immediately apparent that for neither Dorothy nor Carrie are house and home associated with their familiar iterations of haven, emotional sanctuary,

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<sup>5</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in Michael Patrick Hearn *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (New York: Norton, 2000), 92. From this point forward, when referring to Baum’s original text, Baum will be cited as the author, though page numbers will correspond to its reprinting in Hearn’s volume.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Jurca, “Dreiser, Class, and the Home,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Leonard Cassuto and Claire Eby (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 109. She continues: “Coming from a family that had once enjoyed a modest middle-class midwestern life, until his father lost his job as manager of a mill when Dreiser was a young boy, he demonstrates in his fiction a powerful understanding of the precariousness of that existence and of the stabilizing force of a proper ‘home atmosphere.’ He could also imagine the lengths to which a solid citizen might go to achieve it and how great the costs of failing to do so might be. Which is to say that underlying Hurstwood’s brutal decline is a strain of sentiment, which is always entailed in the word home, as great as that which sustains Carrie’s meteoric rise” (109).

or familial warmth. And for both protagonists, *home*, in Columbia City and in Kansas, is a place of hardship, scarcity, and, it seems, little familial affection. That the reader of both texts is given such an inexpressive portrait of the places that were left behind is especially peculiar given that the idea of “home” plays such a central role in the fiction of both writers.

The very first scenes of these two literary works signal their sustained and intimate engagement with the production of social space. Immediately drawing upon the classic trope in Western myth and literature of an individual’s journey from rural pastoral to industrial metropolis, Dreiser and Baum introduce the heavily value-laden and historically gendered opposition between the spatial constructs of “the country” and “the city,” thus inevitably animating the moral economy that accompanies this division.<sup>8</sup> I am interested in the ways in which these texts’ multiple spatial constructs, and the very real spaces on which they are at least partly modeled—not only the home, but also the department store, the factory, the stage, the family farm, to name just a few—embody and sublimate widely shared anxieties surrounding U.S. industrialism and expansionism, urbanization, mass production, and national identity in fin-de-siècle American life. I argue in this chapter and throughout this dissertation that it is through various deployments of the cultural symbol and icon of *home* that such anxieties are played out.

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<sup>8</sup> See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Williams’ looks at the ways the mythic divide between country and city has been reproduced and justified in English literature since the 16<sup>th</sup> century; Marx’s thesis is that American culture lives in an ongoing conflict between the pastoral ideal projected onto the nation and the machine that became not only the driving force in its development, but also the benchmark of a concurrent ideology of progress that celebrates and relies upon technological innovation. Also interesting are William Cronon’s notes on literary depictions of the innate ability to seduce men and debase character: “The object of the city is trade—trade that so often ruins the character—trade that leads men into all the intricacy of vice...The city seems to be the natural home of vice...” The place, simple life of the soil, with its honest hard work and moral uprightness, was “all forgotten in the extravagant and senseless worship of the hollow glitter...of the metropolis,” in *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: WW Norton, 1991), 358.



Baum and Dreiser might immediately seem an unlikely pairing. The world of Baum's children's literature, after all, is one of fantasy, utopia and myth—a world in which optimism and kindness of heart are enough to ensure eternal safety from the dangers of modern life and a promised return to wherever 'home' might be. Dreiser's fiction, however, makes no such promises, and the subjects of his novels have little control over their environment. However, although their work is vastly dissimilar in form and intended audience, for both Dreiser and Baum the mid-western hub city of Chicago, claimed to be the "most American of cities" (although more than three quarters of its residents in the 1890s were born of foreign parentage,<sup>9</sup>) was formative to their lives and literary careers.

And while the two authors may never have met, their paths certainly crossed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition where Dreiser, a budding journalist at twenty-two years old, was sent on assignment by the St. Louis *Republic* to lead a group of twenty schoolteachers, one of which was his future wife Sara Osborne White. After reading about the plans and construction of this Dream City and immediately relocating his family from the South Dakota plains to Chicago in anticipation, Frank Baum, thirty-seven years old at the time of the Great Exposition, visited the Fair multiple times throughout its six month stretch. Indeed Baum was so inspired by the wonders of the White City that he would soon reproduce its spectacular fountains, domes and arches, in a dazzling green cast, in the great epicenter of Oz—the Emerald City.<sup>10</sup> The map of Oz, as Jerry Griswold argues, is a map of the United States, including the regional and even moral distinctions

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 191.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Larson, for example, in his novel *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Madness and Magic at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), contends that L. Frank Baum and illustrator W. W. Denslow based the construction of the shining green capital city of Oz on the alabaster city that they found at the World's Columbian Expo in 1893.

between East, West, North, and South—with the Emerald City as the Chicago of the Columbian Exposition.<sup>11</sup> Several sites within Dreiser’s text also mirror the landscapes and consumer spectacles he witnessed at the Exposition, but perhaps none so evidently as that world of goods Carrie encounters within the urban department store—the first of which she visits, in Chicago, is fittingly named “The Fair.”

In looking at the ways in which the narrative journeys of Dreiser and Baum’s protagonists, Carrie Meeber and Dorothy Gale, intersect in specific places, spaces, and historical moments, my reading of *Sister Carrie* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, particularly when considered alongside the circulation of home imagery and commodities at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, demonstrates the ways in which these authors concurrently wrestle with notions of “home” at a moment when idea itself, as a trope for the desire to belong *and* as a symbol of national unity, is undergoing profound restructuring. It appears that the way in which the protagonists’ curious longing for home is framed and resolved in each text requires both recourse to fantasy and, as the following sections will show, a radical re-construction of the image and idea of home.

### **Part One:**

#### **A New Nostalgia: The Idea and Image of Home at Chicago’s World’s Fair**

Was the American made to seem at home in it?  
-Henry Adams, commenting on the World’s Columbian Exposition

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<sup>11</sup> In “No Place But Home,” Jerry Griswold further explains the resemblances between the map of Oz and the map of the United States: To the west is the land of the Winkies: a wild, untilled region of marauding prairie wolves and not unlike South Dakota where Baum lived as a shopkeeper and newspaperman. To the east is the land of the Munchkins: a place that resembles the Pennsylvania “Dutch” country where many Germans settled (Baum’s ancestors came from Bavaria) to the south is the land of the Quadlings: it is inhabited by hillbilly-like Hammerheads and white-frocked ladies and gentlemen known as the China People (two classes of people with whom Baum became familiar while he was a traveling salesman in the South). To the north (in later Oz book) is Gillikin Country: a place of mountains and lakes, not unlike the Michigan where Baum used to vacation,” in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Autumn, 1987), 462-275.

## CHICAGO

HOG Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I  
have seen your painted women under the gas lamps  
luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it  
is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to  
kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the  
faces of women and children I have seen the marks  
of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who  
sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer  
and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing  
so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on  
job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the  
little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning  
as a savage pitted against the wilderness,

Bareheaded,

Shoveling,

Wrecking,

Planning,

Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with  
white teeth,

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young  
man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has  
never lost a battle,

Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse,  
and under his ribs the heart of the people,

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of  
Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog  
Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with  
Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

-Carl Sandburg (1916)

On July 12, 1893, standing amidst the neoclassical stucco architecture of the White City, University of Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his enormously influential paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association which was held in conjunction with the World’s Fair in Chicago—a Dream City that was erected to celebrate, one year late, the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to America.

Beckoning over 27 million visitors from across the nation, the World’s Columbian Exposition opened on May 1, 1893 on the once swampy shores of Lake Michigan. A spectacular feat of urban architecture as well as a festival of “things” and commerce, the Expo was something of a microcosm of United States culture at the turn of the century, embodying within its more than 65 thousand exhibits many of the dreams and anxieties that were being played out on the national stage. The goal of the fair was not only to *celebrate* and *create* American industrial and urban expansion, but perhaps more importantly, it was meant to provide the national public with a sense of optimism and security at a time of turbulent change and seeming instability. The generation in attendance at the fair, including Dreiser and Baum, were profoundly affected by various national crises of the 1890s. Along with the economic depression, there were farmer and worker upsurges, as well as the perceived end of continental expansion and the beginning of overseas imperialism—each drama compounding an already tumultuous transition from rural and agricultural to urban industrial society.<sup>12</sup> Demanded the Fair’s Director of Works, architect Daniel Hudson Burnham, it was time “to bring order out of the chaos incident to rapid growth.”<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not the fair “brought order” out of the chaos of urban life, as Burnham had

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<sup>12</sup> John Mack Faragher, “The Frontier Trail: Rethinking Turner and Reimagining the American West,” in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (February, 1993): 106-117.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* (The Commercial Club, 1909), 1.

hoped, or if it was a heterotopic site in which these tensions were brought into clearer focus, is a matter of debate. For this reason, the World's Fair in Chicago continues to provide fertile and well-tread ground for scholars of American Studies,<sup>14</sup> as the event epitomizes the very types of metaphors and tensions on which the field was founded: the country and the city (or Leo Marx's "Machine in the Garden"), Civilization and Progress, European versus American aesthetics, imitation versus authenticity, high culture and low.

Selected by Congress in a raging political battle surrounding the event's location, the city of Chicago, "freight handler to the Nation," as it is depicted in the explicitly gendered and sexualized terms of Sandburg's ode two decades later, provided the perfect backdrop for the festivities. Chicago functioned as a gateway between what Henry Adams depicted as "two ways of life:"<sup>15</sup> from a largely agrarian republic to an urban industrialized economy largely based on centralized corporations. What cemented Chicago's ultimate victory was the oft-cited belief that it was the most quintessentially "American" of the nation's hub cities. Within Chicago resides, writes Frank Norris, "the true power and spirit of America."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, this idea of being the "most American" or creating something with a distinctly "national" character or essence has been a central preoccupation of American cultural history and mythmaking—a project in which both Baum and Dreiser would play a key role. At the Fair's Congress of Literature, Hamlin Garland, who had moved to Chicago around the same time as Baum, lamented America's need for a new, distinctive

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<sup>14</sup> For notable contributions, see Robert Rydell, *All The World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Julie K. Brown, *Contesting Images: Photography and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994); Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).

<sup>16</sup> Frank Norris, *The Pit*, quoted in Donald Miller *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (1997), 17.

literary style. Addressing the merits of realism and “local color,” Garland demanded that American writers abandon European aesthetic models in an effort to cement a distinctively *national* literature.

Whether or not Baum or Dreiser was in attendance at the Literature Congress, in the following several decades both would play a critical role in fulfilling Garland’s aspiration for American literature, as Dreiser would come to be known as a landmark figure in the development of American realism (inventing with *Sister Carrie*, as Walter Benn Michaels attests, “a new way of telling a new American story”) and L. Frank Baum would soon be immortalized as the creator of the “first American fairytale.” As if in anticipation of this role, Baum’s preface to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, informs readers that “The time has come for a series of newer ‘wonder tales’ in which the stereotyped genie dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale.” The story aspires, he continues, to be “a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out.”<sup>17</sup> Baum set out to do nothing short of revolutionizing American children’s literature.

Along with Garland’s call for a new American literary form, another attempt to buttress a sense of American exceptionalism and national unity would occur as Frederick Jackson Turner recited his infamous “Frontier Thesis.” Citing the census report of 1890, the historian boldly announced the official close of the American frontier. The frontier, an imaginary boundary that for Turner marked the “meeting point between savagery and civilization,”<sup>18</sup> represented the most salient and lingering myth of America. “Up to our own day,” he posits, “American history has

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<sup>17</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History (From Proceedings of the forty-first annual meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin),” State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894.

been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West.” He defined the West as “an area of free land” marked by “its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward.” It is the steady movement across and settling of this expansive space, he argues broadly, that “explain[s] American development.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, in proposing that the geographical conditions of the frontier played a critical role in shaping American character, Turner’s speech relies on environmental determinism in re-imagining the frontier to be *the* distinctive source of American democracy and its institutions.<sup>20</sup> Women, people of color, the violent destruction of indigenous cultures, and environmental exploitation play minor roles in his narrative—an omission that coincides well with the logic of racial superiority that undergirded the entire exhibition.

In his controversial essay, Turner dramatically revived frontier images that already abounded in the popular national imagination and carried with them deeply ingrained assumptions about gender, race, and sexuality: a virginal feminized landscape; the solitary male figure conquering a wilderness; the rough and tumble pioneer farmer; the stoic, complacent Indian. With captivating prose, he succeeded in consolidating these images into comprehensive and unified narrative of “our” national past.

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in a birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick Turner, “Significance of the Frontier,” access Xroads.virginia.edu, no pagination.

<sup>20</sup> Substantial scholarship criticizes the Turnerian view of American history, of course, and among the most prominent New Western Historians, stressing the importance of addressing/revising the frontier as a *process* rather than a *place* are: Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken History of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); and William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed Turner's narrative depends on a widely shared imagery of a mythic West, which, then and now, holds a salient place in American mythology. In an essay comparing the performative functions of Turner's speech alongside William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Shows, which were held twice daily just outside the official Fair grounds, historian Richard White underscores the power of these pervasive icons, which, he notes, "already contained latent narratives of expansion and progress."<sup>22</sup> One such familiar image that recurred in American frontier narratives leading up to and including Turner's is that of the rustic log cabin. Through the rhetorical mobilization of this image, Turner found a way to connect pioneers with Native Americans and the illusion of an untroubled wilderness. The cabin thus "marked both regression, as the wilderness mastered the settler, and the beginning of the recapitulation of civilized progress." The power of this image also stems from its ability to signal the quintessential "American" value of self-reliance along with the strength and virility involved in the labor of its construction. But above all, as White notes, "the cabin had come to represent progress."<sup>23</sup>

Reading a collection of nineteenth-century narrative images and showing the ways in which the figure of the cabin undergoes vast representational shifts, White traces the process by which

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," access Xroads.virginia.edu, no pagination.

<sup>22</sup> Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," in *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 12. White's central argument in this essay is that by the early twentieth century it was impossible to tell stories about the West or to talk about "America" without recourse to either Buffalo Bill or Turner, and the relationship between the two narratives (Turner's Frontier Thesis and Buffalo Bill's Wild West show) is complex and intricately connected. This fact is elided, however, when Buffalo Bill's narrative is viewed solely as "entertainment" (concerned with myth) and Turner's as factually grounded (concerned with reality). In doing so, it is easy to "miss their common reliance on, and promotion of, the iconography of their time" (45).

<sup>23</sup> Richard White, "Turner and Buffalo Bill," 7.



this icon, which even up to mid-century signified a “rustic backwardness,” eventually came to signify and embody American narratives of progress.<sup>24</sup> To illustrate this process is a critical reading of the cover image on a piece of sheet music entitled *Tippecanoe, The Hero of North Bend: Six Patriotic Ballads* (1840).

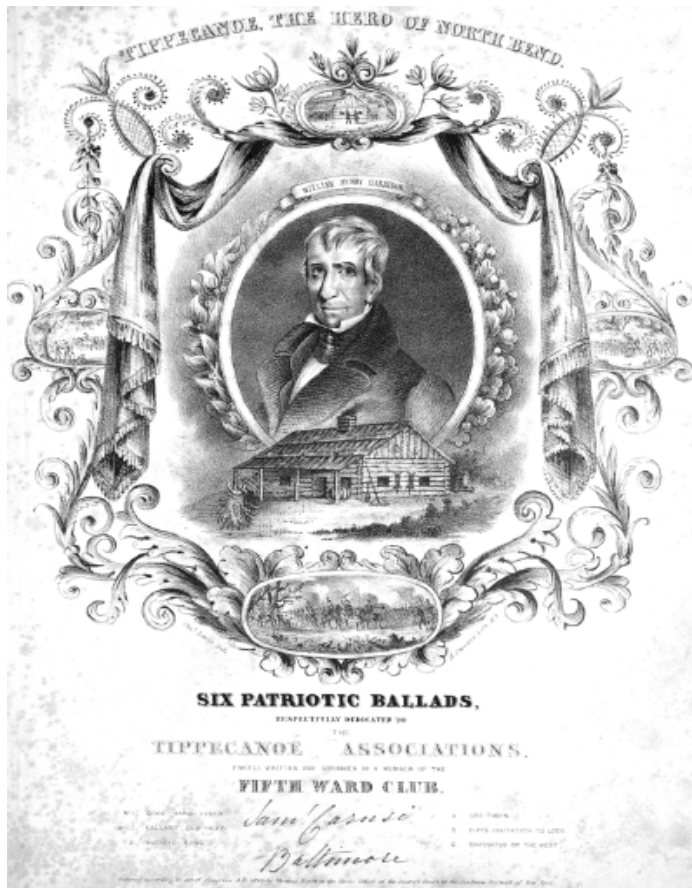


Fig. 2.1: “The Log Cabin: A Favorite Patriotic Ballad.” New York, 1840. The Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, Johns Hopkins University, Sheridan Special Collections.

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Austin provides an interesting parallel to this discourse, in which a rustic domestic structure becomes a national icon, by looking at the process by which the cottage became a vehicle of British public memory. In *Nostalgia in Transition*, she argues: “throughout the nineteenth century, the cottage became, with the child, one of the two main receptacles of public memory in England; but whereas the image of the child mediated an individual past, the identity the cottage forged was, in comparison, wholly communal. It was an idea of the nation founded on an endangered rural capitalism and revived under the aegis of the country’s commercial and imperial ventures” (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 126.

The image depicts a large three-quarter profile of William Henry Harrison hovering above a diminutive log cabin. The structure has several windows and a smoking chimney, suggesting occupancy and activating an image of the hearth inside. The key factor in White's reading is the idea that the austerity of Harrison's early dwelling acquired significance *only when considered alongside his ensuing presidency*. Thus, it was "Only when coupled with a knowledge of the success to follow did the cabin proclaim great achievements from small beginnings."<sup>25</sup> In other words, it was not until this image of the house became a *nostalgic* one that it could assume any trace or value of the progressive.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), scholar Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or never has existed. [It] is a sentiment of loss and displacement but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. (...) The nostalgic mourns for the impossibility of return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values."<sup>27</sup> Like secular notions of "progress," the idea of nostalgia is itself culturally and historically specific. Coined in the seventeenth century by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, the term nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos*, meaning home, and *algia*, signifying longing or pain) was used to diagnose and describe the widespread occurrence of melancholic symptoms that Swiss soldiers were experiencing in epidemic proportions during their time abroad. It is useful, then, to consider what historical conditions animated the shift from nostalgia-as-pathology—where the *home* that was longed for directly referred to a place, the *homeland* or nation of origin—to modern conceptions of nostalgia, where the object of longing, the home, is decidedly more ambiguous.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard White, "Turner and Buffalo Bill," 21.

<sup>26</sup> In considering the log cabin as an American symbol, it is interesting to consider the (still popular) children's building toy, *Lincoln Logs*, which were developed by John Lloyd Wright in 1918 with the slogan "Interesting playthings typifying 'the spirit of America.'"

<sup>27</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 2.

As Boym explains, while the act/affect of longing itself may well be timeless and universal, the “early modern conception embodied in the specific word [nostalgia] came to the fore at a particular historic moment.”<sup>28</sup> It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, Peter Fritzsche concurs, that nostalgia became a household word, “its general usage made tenable by the massive displacing operations of industrialization and urbanization, which also standardized its meaning as a vague, collective longing for a bygone time rather than an individual desire to return to a particular place.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the modern ideas of both nostalgia (looking back) and progress (looking forward) are intimately and inseparably linked.

This dual gaze is well articulated in Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” in which several different notions of nostalgia are at play.<sup>30</sup> Though he frequently gestures towards the future, in professing that the closing of the frontier marked the end of an historical époque, stating definitively that “never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves,” it is important to recognize that Turner is speaking of a moment that has presumably already passed. His thesis is a tribute to this “greatest of historical movements,” but the tribute functions dually as a eulogy. Something has been lost.

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<sup>28</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Fritzsche, “How Nostalgia Narrates Modernity,” in *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German History and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 62.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Renato Renaldo defines “imperialist nostalgia” as an innocent yearning for what one has helped intentionally to efface or destroy. It is an affective response by which individuals or groups (frequently the very agents of colonialism) “mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed,” in *Culture and Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 69. In addition, As William Cronon suggests, the myth of “free land” on which Turner’s thesis relies helped to consolidate a narrative of American history only insofar as it elided the legitimacy of Native American claims to the land. In this discourse of empty space—abounding in “vast forests,” “desolate, grass-clad prairies,” and “barren oceans of rolling plains, arid deserts, and a fierce race of savages”—Native Americans are depicted as contiguous with the landscape itself. Indeed, Native Americans exist only on the margins of Turner’s narrative, the subject of an open wilderness taking center stage. His treatise acknowledges conflict with Native Americans, but he justifies these conflicts as an inevitable, even ordained, part of a much larger process. And although Turner did not use the manifestly racist language of many of his contemporaries in his depictions of Indians, his assumptions were nearly identical: the “fierce savages” were unfortunate obstacles to be conquered along the blameless path towards civilization.

With the passing of the frontier, and with it “the first period of American history,” a “new age” was inaugurated “which is replacing the era of free lands and of measurable isolation by consolidated and complex industrial development.” And indeed, delivered from within the walls of the great White City, the historian’s lament was proffered at a moment when modern industry and technological progress were already profoundly and irreversibly transforming the urban American landscape.

With the frontier now closed, Turner considers the nation’s future with hope, perhaps, but also with marked uncertainty, for if the frontier functioned as the harbinger of American history and identity—its unique geography breeding self-reliance, just democracies, and continuous community renewal—on what would these ideas be based in modern, post-frontier American civilization?<sup>31</sup> Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, with his “face turned towards the past,” Turner places himself at a precipitous moment of historical rupture. Instead of looking upon the *wreckage* of history, however, as in Benjamin reading of Klee’s angel, Turner constructs an uncritical and unified vision of its *triumphs*. In publicly mourning the frontier from within the Court of Honor in Chicago’s World’s Fair—a literal materialization and national performance of this advancing march of progress—Turner stood in the very vortex of this transformation, “The White City rising,” writes Rosemarie Bank, “where log cabins and the homes of the Potawami once stood.”<sup>32</sup> *Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas (or Columbia City) anymore.*

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<sup>31</sup> See William Spanos, “American Exceptionalism, The Jeremiad, and the Frontier,” on how the “jeremiadic” frontier thesis address was also a rhetorical ideological strategy—to shore up the notion of the “frontier spirit” in American culture and to extend the frontier mentality, the American ‘errand into the wilderness’ beyond the confines of the US in *boundary 2*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 2007). This idea of conquering new frontiers has been attributed to readings of the Wizard of Oz as well.

<sup>32</sup> Rosemarie K Bank, “Representing History, Performing the Columbian Exposition,” *Theater Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2002).



Fig. 2.2: "Hunter's Cabin." In order to live within this extensive project, Daniel Burnham had this cabin built near The Wooded Island of the World's Columbian Exposition. The project was sponsored by the Boone and Crockett Club,<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In Portfolio No. 3 of *The Dream City: A Portfolio of Photographic Views of the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893), this caption appears under the image of The Hunter's Cabin: "At the south end of the Wooded Island was a log house with clay floor and stick chimney which was built by Theodore Roosevelt, of New York, a lover of huntsman's sports, as a museum and memorial in honor of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. A rope divided the large room of the building into a public and private compartment. On chilly days a fire blazed in the broad fireplace, and in that regard the interior exactly resembled the houses of pioneers in timbered regions forty years ago. Otherwise the furnishings were more comfortable than those enjoyed in northern Indiana when Pierce and Buchanan were in the White House. The skins of wild animals covered the floor, and beds and settees were made of stretched skins. A double bunk afforded two wide and easy couches. A stool was made out of a section of log, and primitive cooking apparatus and tin dishes and candles gave a realistic appearance to the domicile. To complete this picture, a hunter in long hair and wide-brimmed felt hat made his home in the cabin and answered the questions of many visitors, for there was a charm about the premises, pioneers loving to recall the vanished days, and younger inquirers seeming pleased to see before them the picture so often drawn in the tales of their grandsires and this chapter of their romances. Between the Hunter's Cabin and Marie Antoinette's bed-chamber in the French section was a wide divergence" (57). Complete document is available at the open-access Smithsonian-affiliated digital library, The Internet Archive. See: <https://archive.org/details/dreamcityportfol00worl>

## Part II: Home in Dreiser and Baum

Anywhere in lonely farm houses, the women of to-day, confined absolutely to this strangling cradle of the race, go mad by scores and hundreds...In the cities, where there is less 'home life,' people seem to stand it better.

-Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898)

That the image of the log cabin in popular nineteenth-century representations obtained significance “only when coupled with a knowledge of the success to follow,” as Richard White explains, reiterates the idea that what mattered in the idea of progress were improvements in the future, not reflections on the past. Taking into account these implicit contradictions in the very idea of nostalgia itself offers a way in which readers might frame the ambivalent and sometimes paradoxical treatment of home, its authorial placement and displacement, in both *Sister Carrie* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In what follows, I will consider more closely how images and ideas of home are depicted in Baum and Dreiser’s texts in order to put these representations in conversation with the often-contradictory discourses of nostalgia and progress that circulated at the World’s Fair.

### ***Dorothy’s Home:***

As is well known, Dorothy’s journey through Oz is driven by her relentless desire to return home. However, the popular mantra for which the story has become most culturally renowned, “There’s no place like home,” has far more to do with Victor Fleming’s iconic 1939 film version, and is in fact uttered only once in Baum’s original tale in a relatively minor scene. Although the significance of the vast differences between Baum’s text and the MGM film will be discussed at length in Chapter Four, it is important to note here that the most crucial distinction between the book and its filmic adaptation is the latter’s near complete omission of the stark, abject poverty in

which Dorothy lives in Baum's 1900 text. This omission, or rather, revision (since her home in the film, while surely not luxurious, is far superior in both size and decor), is significant because it fundamentally shifts the object and nature of Dorothy's nostalgic desire—which is the driving force of both narratives.

In the very first page of Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he describes the one-room Kansas farmhouse as being “small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon for many miles.” He continues by describing, briefly and without flourish, the rustic layout of the house and the minimal, functional objects within it: “There were four walls, a floor and a roof, which made *one room*; and this room contained a rusty looking cooking stove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em had a big bed in the corner, and Dorothy a little bed in another corner.”<sup>34</sup> Even though Baum devotes so little time to Dorothy's home, the bleak traces of pioneer life and the toll that this omnipresent “grayness” has not only on the landscape, but also on the physical body and human spirit, is remarkably evident in these first few paragraphs. Of the Kansas landscape, we learn that “The sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere.” The house, just like the sun-baked landscape, is gray. It had been painted once, Baum writes, “but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and gray as everything else.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, everywhere there is gray in Baum's description of Kansas—a monochromatic fate overtakes even Aunt Em, who was once a “young, pretty wife” before the “sun and wind had changed her too.” Turning the woman herself into a shade of gray, these

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<sup>34</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 91.

<sup>35</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 92.

unforgiving natural forces had “taken the sparkle from [Em’s] eyes” and “the red from her cheeks and lips.” Uncle Henry too, who “worked hard from morning to night and did not know what joy was,” was saturated in this pervasive grayness, “from his long beard to his rough boots.”<sup>36</sup> It is only by the furious grace of a cyclone that Baum can emancipate Dorothy from the grim Kansas fate that has befallen her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. In Baum’s brief portrayal, both the house itself *and* the physical body mirror the landscape and become an indistinguishable part of it. In these few opening paragraphs, the author makes clear the drudgery of pioneer life and the toll that this omnipresent “grayness” has not only on the Kansas landscape, but also on the physical body and human spirit.

It is with the same emphasis on the toll of labor and environmental force that Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber describes her sister, with whom she lodges briefly upon her arrival in Chicago. At Minnie’s flat on Van Buren Street, the first place Carrie calls “home” after her departure from her family, she felt the “drag of a lean and narrow life,” and she laments that her sister had “changed considerably” since Carrie had last seen her. “She was now a thin though rugged woman of twenty-seven, with ideas of life colored by her husband’s, and fast hardening into even narrower conceptions of pleasure and duty than had ever been hers in a thoroughly circumscribed youth.”<sup>37</sup> While Carrie Meeber is drawn to the “strange energies” of the city, lured by a “giant magnet,” by a “power and force she didn’t understand,”<sup>38</sup> the choice to leave home was her own. It is an altogether different kind of power and force—a natural disaster endemic to the American Midwest—that transports Dorothy, against her wishes, out of Kansas and into the Land of Oz, out of the determinist fate of (Dreiser’s) naturalism and into a context of fantasy.

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<sup>36</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 92-93.

<sup>37</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 17.



What is it about *home*, then, represented by the grayness of endless toil, scarcity, and poverty, that precludes Dorothy from enjoying the land of Oz, a country of full of abundance and color, where there are few material needs and work is balanced in equal measure with pleasure and entertainment?<sup>39</sup> “It’s one thing for Dorothy to want to get home,” admits Palestinian-born writer Salman Rushdie, “and quite another that she can only do so by eulogizing the ideal state which Kansas so obviously is not.”<sup>40</sup> Although Rushdie otherwise adores *The Wizard of Oz*, crediting as his “very first literary influence,” and “the thing that started me writing,” he remains unconvinced and confounded by its protagonist’s unyielding nostalgia.

To further trouble Rushdie’s dilemma, we might return to the powerful and contradictory nostalgia(s) at play in Turner’s speech, along with the pervasive rhetorical power of the domestic images it invoked. Richard White suggests, “Even as they told their stories, Turner and Buffalo Bill shared a conviction that the experience that had produced them was no longer available. The Wild West, The frontier, was dead. And *the icons of that frontier themselves became tinged with an aura of loss*” (my emphasis).<sup>41</sup> If the log cabin was the “primary icon of the nineteenth-century frontier, if not American culture itself,” perhaps it is useful to consider the ways in which the isolated image of Dorothy’s one-room Kansas farmhouse might also function, for both Baum and his readers, as a

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<sup>39</sup> In attempting to explain Dorothy’s unshakable love of home, some of Baum’s readers and critics have suggested that the tale is a parable signifying Baum’s alleged loyalty to the fledgling Populist movement. Henry Littlefield’s analysis in *American Quarterly* (1964) is among the most well known of these readings (although most critics and scholars find it unconvincing and difficult to substantiate).<sup>39</sup> The scarecrow, in Littlefield’s reading represents the farmer, the tin woodman an industrial laborer, and the lion represents the figure of William Jennings Bryan. Here, Dorothy’s Kansas home, the family farm, denotes a fair, economically stable system that stands in direct opposition to the industrialization and commercial excess that is reflected in its opposite, the garish Emerald City. With a primary focus on farming and agricultural production, the idea of value, for the populists, is straightforward—it is a product of individual labor and it is based on human necessity.

<sup>40</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Richard White, “Turner and Buffalo Bill,” 45.

nostalgic image of a recent frontier past. But how far might such a reading, which takes into account the historically specific power of this image, go in making Dorothy's inscrutable nostalgia more convincing to the legion of contemporary critics of Baum's tale?

On one level, L. Frank Baum took this unspoiled image of the house and, almost literally, turned it on its head. After being recklessly tossed about by the Kansas cyclone, Dorothy's house crashes down into the Land of Oz (incidentally killing an evil witch). Once again rooted in solid ground, bright sunshine crept through the window and made the small room glitter as the girl stepped outside. It is interesting to note that Dorothy will never again, in the entire fifteen-book Oz series, exit or enter through this door. It thus may function as a threshold symbol indicating, perhaps, the meeting place of local (Kansas) and national (Oz) discourses, or between wilderness (nature) and civilization (culture). This final exit may function as well as a guarantee that no matter the outcome of her epic quest, Dorothy, to quote Thomas Wolfe, indeed *can't go home again*, since home, like Turner's frontier, is always *elsewhere*.

Despite insisting on her Kansas home as a referent, the house to which she returns at the tale's end is a newly built one—the uprooted house of her childhood will forever remain in Oz. This is a pivotal moment in Baum's text. As the house that stands before her, an image of the frontier farm, is now empty, displaced, broken, and even *fatal*, the complicated narrative of Dorothy's desire to return begins to emerge. It is here that one of the distinctions between Baum's original text and Fleming's film (which will be investigated further in chapter three) gains crucial significance. In the film, Dorothy, accused of being frivolous and pushed aside by her aunt, uncle and the three farmhands, already longs for someplace new, someplace "free of trouble," *somewhere over the rainbow*. In contrast, Baum's Dorothy remains "merry" in Kansas and wants for nothing.

Desire does not enter Dorothy's consciousness until the moment her house lands in Oz. From within this narrative moment, *home* becomes a Thing—the object of desire, that which has been irretrievably lost. In sequence, this scene also frames the moment in which the necessary split between subject and object that nostalgia requires occurs. In short, it is from within Munchkin County that Dorothy's inscrutable nostalgia takes shape.

Even if her actual house was the culprit of her wresting from Kansas, and despite her “insistence on [her home's] geographic locality,” from this moment on “home” would be for Dorothy a pastoral myth and an image onto which which she can project a fantasy of returning.<sup>42</sup> This helps, then, to address the question with which this chapter began: why, for a story so passionately devoted to home, does Baum spend fewer than three pages depicting Dorothy's actual Kansas home front? The Kansas of Dorothy's memory, that bleak one-room shanty with “nothing but the great gray prairie on every side,” is surely no agrarian or domestic paradise, but, like Turner's mythic image of “free land” and the (often racist) discourse of empty space on which it relies, so long as it remains empty, Dorothy can imagine the potential for Kansas to *become* something else, something better, perhaps even a place like Oz. Consider, too, that motivating the author L. Frank Baum's own westward journey (he relocated from Syracuse New York to the Dakota Territory in 1888) was his certainty, as expressed in a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law that same year, that the desolate pioneer town of Aberdeen was destined “to become a good city and it may even be a metropolis.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and the Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows,” *Representations*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1988): 101.

<sup>43</sup> L. Frank Baum to T. Clarkson Gage, 30 July 1888 (L. Frank Baum Collection, Alexander Mitchell Library, Aberdeen South Dakota), quoted in Nancy Tystad Koupal, “The Wonderful Wizard of the West: L. Frank Baum in South Dakota 1888-91” *Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1989).

John Funchion uses Baum's description of Dorothy's home as dull, "sun-blistered," and ascetic in order to emphasize the crucial importance of perceiving this home as a *blank canvas*. "Such a blankness," he writes "suggests that something about the desire to return to the American home lies in its blankness, its void of possibility, which can be filled or supplemented by any number of possible imaginary but unrealizable homes."<sup>44</sup> Recall that there is no empty space in Oz. From the beginning to the end of her journey—from the verdant landscape of Muchkinland, with its trees of ripe fruits, exotic flowers and birds, to the candydrop metropolis of the Emerald City—the landscape is cluttered, colorful, and full of movement. Its enchantment is inevitably magnified by its visual opposite in Kansas, where one could see "nothing but the great gray prairie" for miles and miles.

In *Sister Carrie*, within Dreiser's depiction of turn-of-the-century Chicago there is a similar depiction of blankness, of an emptiness waiting to be filled,<sup>45</sup> of the anticipation of progress. Echoing the social Darwinism as well as the personification of the environment that we find in Turner, Dreiser writes:<sup>46</sup>

Streetcar lines had been extended far out into the country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone – a pioneer of the populous

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<sup>44</sup> John Funchion, "When Dorothy Became History: L. Frank Baum's Enduring Fantasy of Cosmopolitan Nostalgia," in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (2010): 437. See also Paul Nathanson, in *Over the Rainbow*, who writes that Kansas "symbolically transcends time and space, history and geography" and as an "empty" space "can be filled with the dreams of all Americans" (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 157.

<sup>45</sup> This metaphor echoes Annette Kolodny's theory of the feminization and sexualization of the American landscape in *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>46</sup> Compare Dreiser's description with this passage in Turner's "Frontier" speech: "The buffalo trail became the Indian trail, and this became the trader's 'trace' the trails widened to roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads...until at last the slender paths of aboriginal intercourse have been broadened and interwoven into the complex mazes of modern commercial lines; the wilderness has been interpenetrated by lines of civilization growing ever more numerous. It is like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent."

ways to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which were yet lighted throughout the night with long, blinking lines of gas-lamps, fluttering in the wind. Narrow boardwalks extended out, passing here a house, there a store, at far intervals, eventually ending on the open prairie.<sup>47</sup>

Dreiser, here, signals something like a new *electrical* frontier, an idea that we will revisit in the following chapter. In addition, like Turner's frontier environment that would be the driving force in the creation of "American" character, the city, in Dreiser's depiction, which "had lain miles and miles of streets and sewers," is depicted as a transformative agent. Explicitly engaging the language of the frontier, in Dreiser's image of the "solitary house," the structure itself is also personified—it is a prescient "pioneer" that "stands" before a backdrop of emptiness. As Philip Fisher (1985) notes, in such depictions of Chicago, which could just as well be descriptions of America as a whole, "Dreiser invents a feeling of the pathos of the future that is complementary to the nostalgia or regret that are the traditional forms of the pathos of the past."<sup>48</sup> The gas lamps that shine onto the otherwise desolate prairie in Dreiser's passage position the landscape halfway between wilderness and urban civilization, and it is this illuminated blankness, alongside the "one solitary house [which] stood out alone," that enables a vision of the progress to come to such yet-intermediary landscapes.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press), 129.

<sup>49</sup> In considering the material impact and symbolic power that the dawn of *electric* lighting had on urban space, Scott McQuire details how the dreamlike night city, in scenes like this one depicted by Dreiser quickly became a key site, a "symbolic screen on which the contradictory desires of the 20th century's "new man," split between restless ambition for the endless conquest of new frontiers and a nostalgic longing for the security of a stable home" would be projected and performed. This will be investigated further in the following chapter. Scott McQuire, "Immaterial Architectures: Urban Space and Electric Light," *Space and Culture* Vol. 8, No. 2 (2005): 126.

### *Carrie's Home:*

For Carrie, the idea of home registers on several levels: There is the Wisconsin home of her childhood, of course, about which the reader gleans little information other than the fact that she was vaguely “dissatisfied” there;<sup>50</sup> there is her sister’s flat on Van Buren Street which she briefly calls home upon her arrival in Chicago; there are her numerous rental spaces she occupies in Chicago and New York; and there is the less tangible *sense* or ideal of home for which Carrie longs throughout the novel and obsessively struggles to create. This particular homing desire extends far beyond the multiple and transitory spaces Carrie occupies throughout the text—Minnie’s flat, the room on Wabash Avenue that Drouet provides for her as a “kept woman,” the “cosy chamber” the two eventually share, the series of declining rental spaces she shares with Hurstwood in New York, and finally the lavish Waldorf Astoria hotel in which she takes residence on her own by the novel’s close. While perhaps projected onto what is imagined to be a real, material place, a *house* or apartment even, the object of this longing, I suggest, is in fact far more formless and impenetrable. This unyielding desire is for a *feeling* of being “at home,” for Heidegger’s at-homeness—a sense of rootedness in the world. Carrie’s endless search for pleasure and belonging in the city, and, I suggest, her related desire for *home*, is explicitly gendered and subsumed by a discourse and performance of consumer desire.

If Dorothy’s nostalgia is hyperbolized, perhaps altogether unconvincing, Carrie’s primary affect<sup>51</sup> would seem to be anything *but* nostalgic, since returning to her Columbia City home, for her, would indicate personal failure. “What else could I do?” she demands of her reflection in the

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<sup>50</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> In a recent essay, Lauren Berlant defines affect as something that “embeds the subject in an historical field, and that its scholarly pursuit can communicate the conditions of an historical moment’s production as a visceral moment,” in “Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event,” *American Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2008): 845.

mirror in an attempt to justify using her body as barter for the money, clothing and small apartment room that Drouet has provided. “Where could I have gone? Not home again – oh I did not want to go there.” To this her conscience responds: “Step into the streets, return to your home, be as you were. Escape! I can’t. I can’t, was her only reply.” While Dorothy *demands* return, in other words, Carrie *rejects* it.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the fact that Carrie exhibits very little emotional attachment to her childhood home, she is still not immune to occasional moments of what *appear* to be nostalgia, and I am interested in briefly looking at several moments that animate these infrequent but affectively charged reminiscences about a place and time in his protagonists’ history that is deliberately elided in Dreiser’s text. It is important to recognize that within these moments of reflection, the details describe not the ordinary home for which she is briefly longing, but rather they express, in sometimes extensive detail, (in fact it can be argued that it is only from within these moments of melancholic reflection that the reader can sympathetically grasp any great depth of Carrie’s character and inner life), the character of the longing itself.

The first domestic space in which Carrie lodges after leaving Columbia City is in the modest apartment of her sister’s family, the Hansen’s. It is from within this bleak space that “Amid all the maze, uproar and novelty [Carrie] felt cold reality taking her by the hand.” As indexed above, Carrie is deeply affected by the drabness of both her sister’s appearance and her sister’s home. Her peculiar sensitivity to the objects within the domestic environment, particularly the furniture, fuels these feelings of disappointment and restlessness. “The walls were discordantly

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<sup>52</sup> Claire Eby, from the Dreiser web source of Penn Library, suggests that “Carrie rejects the frugality and hard work favored by her sister and brother in law, Sven and Minnie Hanson, those upright but dull exemplars of the Protestant work ethic. Representative of a new generation of Americans, Carrie is not one to “submit...to a solemn round of industry” while postponing gratification (32).

papered,” she observes. “The floors were covered with matting and the hall laid with thin rag carpet. One could see that the furniture was of that poor, hurriedly patched-together quality which was then being sold by the installment houses (...) Something about the place *irritated* her, she did not know what.”<sup>53</sup> Carrie’s irritation seems an unusual response here, but it plays a significant role in helping the reader to identify the source of what Thomas Riggio, calls, in an essay of the same title, “Carrie’s Blues.” To have a case of “the blues” is to suffer an ongoing mood in which the object of one’s dissatisfaction or unhappiness seems general or ambiguous, at once everywhere and nowhere. To further underscore this pervasive melancholy that overcomes Carrie throughout the text, I suggest, following Sianne Ngai, that underlying this “blues” there is a dialectical tension between irritation and envy, both subsumed by a steady *mood* of longing.<sup>54</sup>

In her book *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai includes both irritation and envy in her list of “minor negative affects,” or those feelings that are “far less intentional or object-directed” than the more intense or dramatic emotions that dominate critical attention in the philosophical canon—jealousy, anger, or fear, for example. Because “ugly feelings” lack a clearly defined object, argues Ngai, they are “more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities.”<sup>55</sup> Standing in the parlor of her sister’s apartment, Carrie cannot articulate the source of her irritation, but the sensation persists. Several days later, a similar air of “mingled expectancy and disappointment” returns as Carrie stands in the doorway at the foot of the stairs of the Van Buren apartment. Here,

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<sup>53</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 13 (my emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> To distinguish between emotion and mood, Ngai refers to Annette Baier: “Emotions...are about something, not everything, while moods, if they are about anything, seem to be about nearly everything.” For this reason, “we can ask what makes a person depressed, solemn, irritable...and sometimes get an answer, but the answer need not tell us what they are depressed about, what occasion they are solemnizing, or what irritates them...Moods are either objectless, or have near all-inclusive and undifferentiated objects.” In other words, “a mood is an emotion searching for an “appropriate object” (179).

<sup>55</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 20.



at the threshold between the confinement of the flat and the vibrant action of the street, is one of the very few textual moments in which Carrie's imagination courses back to Columbia City.

Gazing out into the evening street:

Her imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes or enjoyment. She would have a far-off thought of Columbia City now and then or an *irritating rush of feeling* concerning her experiences of the present day, but on the whole the little world about her enlisted her whole attention.<sup>56</sup>

This "rush of feeling" that emerges out of envy-irritation-home triangulation returns as Carrie sits by her Ogden Place window, later in the novel:

At her window she thought it over, rocking to and fro and gazing out across the lamplit ark toward the lamplit houses on Warren Avenue and Ashland Boulevard. She was too wrought up to care to go down to eat, too pensive to do aught but rock and sing. Some old tunes crept to her lips and as she sang them her heart sank. She longed and longed and longed. It was now for the old cottage room in Columbia City, now the mansion up on the Shore Drive, now the fine dress of some lady, now the elegance of some scene.<sup>57</sup>

Immediately after the phrase "She longed and longed and longed," if we consider this mood of longing to be an emotion searching for an object, the reader is given a list of *possible* objects: "It was now for the old cottage room in Columbia City, now the mansion up on the Shore Drive, now the fine dress of some lady and now the elegance of some scene." The old Wisconsin home, here (its next to last mention in the text), is included in a list of things that Carrie longs for, in part envies (though the role of Carrie's *envy* will be further examined below), and cannot have.

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<sup>56</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 116 (my emphasis).

The reader is told that something about Minnie's flat "irritates" Carrie, although she cannot locate the source of this bothersome feeling. "[Carrie] only knew," Dreiser follows, "that these *things*, to her, were dull and commonplace." Carrie thus projects her mood onto physical objects and the material ordering of the Hanson's home. She rejects them, she does not identify with them, they are not "her"—a phrase that encapsulates well a slippage between *being* and *having*, and the profound changes in the relationship between individuals and goods that emerges as a central phenomenon of the burgeoning consumer culture of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>58</sup> In Carrie's deliberate association (or *dissociation*) of her *self* with these domestic objects, this early moment in Dreiser's text sets the stage for Carrie's growing obsession with things and her shrewd recognition of the power and the promise of commodities—their ability to tell stories both to and about the consumer.

If the domestic economy of the Hanson's home is stifling to Carrie, however, it is from within the space of the department store that she is reinvigorated. With worlds of goods on display in expertly designed combinations, Carrie can for a moment place herself in any one of these tempting vignettes and imagine who she might become, if only she had some of these *things*. In contrast to Minnie's flat, then, a grating reminder of her recent past and the family life and world of labor that she left behind, the department store directs Carrie's longing towards the endless possibilities of the future. From within these "vast retail combinations" Carrie reconceives notions of family and home into a national consumer narrative:

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<sup>58</sup> See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of Modern Culture* (New York, Pantheon, 1981); Alan Trachtenberg *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); and David Nye *Electrifying America: The Social Meanings of a New Technology 1880-1940* (1992).

Not only did Carrie feel the drag of desire for all of this...but she noticed, too, with a touch at the heart, the fine ladies who elbowed and ignored her, brushing past in utter disregard of her presence, themselves eagerly enlisted in the materials which the store contained. Carrie was not familiar with the appearance of her more fortunate sisters of the city.... A flame of envy lighted in her heart. She realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole and fulsome heart.

Though she fled her rural Columbia City in order to escape the patriarchal family model, in the department store Carrie establishes familial ties with the her fellow women shoppers, “her more fortunate sisters of the city.” Envyng the social class that is advertised by the women’s behavior and material appearance, Carrie is reminded of her own inadequacies—trapped between the washed-up and worn-out appearance of her biological sister and the refined elegance of her new/national sisters who pay her no mind. By participating in this pedagogy of performance and desire, it is from within this modern space of commodity spectacle, the department store, that Carrie is reconstructed as an “American,” finding home in the nation, incorporated within its emerging commodity market.<sup>59</sup>

However, just as Carrie describes the interior and furnishings of her (biological) sister’s apartment with more detail and feeling than she offers in her description of Minnie herself or their relationship, the women with whom Carrie comes in contact in the department store, those *other* sisters, become just another part of the store’s menagerie—inseparable from the various other “materials which the store contained.” Presented as objects, then, “flattened into a material image,”

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<sup>59</sup> Miles Orville highlights the way in which department stores shared a similar “ethical, practical and aesthetic orientation” as World’s Fairs; both were viewed as “expressions of high national purpose.” Thus, he continues, “when Seigel-Cooper installed in its New York store a copy of the Daniel Chester French statue, Republic, from the 1893 Chicago Exposition, and when John Wannamaker installed in his Philadelphia store the great eagle from the 1903 St. Louis World’s Fair, these were merely crowning manifestations of a longstanding continuity between our officially certified national purpose and merchandising” (*The Real Thing*, 41).

as Lori Merish writes, most of the women with whom Carrie interacts are “of interest only as a visual representation of desirability and allure.” Nonetheless, Dreiser depicts this “flame of envy” that ignites in Carrie the first time she encounters the department store as a constructive force, one that ultimately drives her ambition to become successful actress—“She desires consumer goods, and she desires to become one herself—an *object of display* on the stage.”<sup>60</sup>

In the following section, I consider the emphasis Baum and Dreiser place on the role of objects and material culture in their texts. In both texts it is in large part objects themselves that tell the story of the rise of consumer capitalism in American cultural history. Indeed, a major contribution of both authors involves their recognition of the ways in which things can, and do, speak persuasively to desiring subjects—with what Dreiser calls “the voice of the so-called inanimate.” Bill Brown notes that among the realists and naturalists, Dreiser is the writer who is “most devoted to things: to the detailed rendering of city streets, hotels and restaurants and office buildings, magnificent mansions and squalid flats, shoes and scarves and jackets and skirts.”<sup>61</sup> To be sure, commodities are central figures in *Sister Carrie*—objects and artifacts literally speak to Carrie throughout the novel.

Similarly, L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is abounding with objects that either speak directly or contain some other intrinsic magical or human quality. Even the desperate wishes of Dorothy’s friends—a heart for the Tin Woodman, a brain for the Scarecrow, and courage for the Cowardly Lion—are ultimately granted by the Wizard in the form of surrogate material

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<sup>60</sup> Lori Merish, “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1996): 321. She also notes, and I will later revisit: “In this scene, Carrie’s desire for “freedom” and escape from the patriarchal family is scripted into a national consumerist form” (320).

<sup>61</sup> Bill Brown, “The Matter of Dreiser’s Materialism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 84.

objects that only *represent* the quality each figure purportedly lacks. In place of a brain, the scarecrow receives “a measure of bran” which is “mixed with pins and needles.”<sup>62</sup> For a heart, the Wizard carefully inserts into the Tin Woodman’s hollow chest a heart-shaped ornament “made entirely of silk and stuffed with sawdust.” And in the transubstantiate process that gives the lion his courage, the creature is asked to drink the contents of “a square green bottle ... which he pours into a green-gold dish, beautifully carved.”<sup>63</sup> Despite the Wizard’s admitted fraud and ultimate powerlessness, with these supplemental objects, the three figures’ desires are, for the moment, satisfied. It is only Dorothy’s wish, to return home, that the Wizard cannot fulfill with a substitute object. This final section will pay close attention to the way in which the central desires of their protagonists, for *home* and for *things*, are produced and sustained through a new visual economy of display that saturates the urban landscape at this time. New technologies of “glass, color, and light,” play a central role in Dreiser’s linking of Carrie’s insatiable desire with the rapidly evolving consumer culture in turn-of-the-century Chicago and New York. Curiously, it is the *same* modern technology of display that enables Baum’s protagonist, Dorothy Gale, to hold fast in her nostalgic insistence that *there’s no place like home*.

### Part Three: “The Glass Mediated Theatricality of Everyday Life”: Things, Fantasy, and Display

A study of commodity culture always turns out to be an exploration of a fantastic realm in which things act, speak, rise, fall, fly, evolve.

-Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*

It is said that people are not readily deceived by window displays, but we all know better than that.

-L. Frank Baum, *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*

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<sup>62</sup> Baum, *Wizard*, 276.

<sup>63</sup> Baum, *Wizard*, 279.

Both the World's Columbian Exhibition and the department store stand are emblematic spatial representations of a new visual economy that rapidly overtook the American cityscape in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The "long, blinking lines of gas lamps" in Dreiser's above description of turn-of-the-century Chicago, which illuminated the night and "flutter[ed] in the wind," might function as well to highlight the excitement and ambivalence surrounding the new effects of gas and especially electric illumination that are taking place in the modern city. Chicago's Fair, which contained and displayed more electric light than any modern city in the United States, epitomized the symbolic power of spectacular lighting that became an important cultural practice in the three decades between 1885 and 1915.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, as David Nye explains, millions of the visitors to World's Fairs witnessed more artificial light than they had ever seen in their lives.<sup>65</sup> Together with these technologies of light as well as extensive vertical development, the recent production and availability of *plate glass* had dramatic effects on the ways in which the built environment produced and amplified new modes of desire. In his authoritative *Land of Desire* (1994), William Leach sees in the show window a perfect representation of the emerging commercial aesthetic of the late nineteenth century. The core components of an effective shop window – *color, glass and light* – are themselves, according to Leach, the "visual materials of desire." Possibly "the most powerful field of desire yet to appear in American cities," the new glass and electric landscape on which the advent of show window design and advertising relied began to fundamentally alter the way people related to goods."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> David Nye, *Electrification*, 37.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 41.

In the department store, writes Alan Trachtenberg, “goods showed themselves as more than mere goods, mere objects of use; displayed under sparkling lights, in artful arrangements, they spoke a language of value beyond the practical. Department stores experimented in presenting goods as if they represented something other than themselves, some touch of class, of status, of prestige.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in his description of “The Fair,” the department store from which Carrie Meeber’s insatiable longing for material things is infinitely amplified, Dreiser (in the strange authorial voice-over with which he sometimes interjects in the novel), takes pains to historicize these modern commercial institutions: “The nature of these vast retailing combinations, should they ever permanently disappear, will form an interesting chapter in the commercial history of our nation. Such a flowering out of a modest trade principle the world had never witnessed up to that time.”<sup>68</sup> From inside Dreiser’s department stores, commodities come alive and make eager pleas to his desirous Carrie: “My dear, said the lace collar she secured from Partridge’s, ‘I fit you beautifully; don’t give me up,’” and “Ah, such little feet,’ said the leather of the soft new shoes; ‘how effectively I cover them. What a pity they should ever want my aid.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the way in which things are deliberately and dramatically personified in *Sister Carrie*, adopting what Dreiser calls “the voice of the so-called inanimate,” stages an effect in which professionals in the relatively new advertising practice of window dressing would find remarkable value. Bill Brown contends that “Although Carrie will ultimately succeed within New York’s theater world, it is the *glass-mediated theatricality of everyday life* that she enters as, stepping off the train at Chicago, she enters

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<sup>67</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 131.

<sup>68</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 98.

modernity.”<sup>70</sup> I suggest that the same spatial and temporal transformation occurs in Baum’s Dorothy upon her arrival in Oz, and most dramatically as she enters the gates of the opulent Emerald City.

In an interesting parallel, L. Frank Baum, before achieving success with his Oz tales, was amongst the pioneers of this nascent advertising technology that paid special attention to the aesthetic display of goods in elaborate show windows as a way of engaging the *visual* as a means to serve business ends. After moving from South Dakota to Chicago, Baum developed a growing interest in window display and design, soon becoming an advisor to some of the largest department stores in the city. In fact, in the same year that Baum published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he also authored an extensive trade publication entitled *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*. A frequent contributor to the trade catalogue “The Show Window,” and the founder of the National Association of Window Trimmers (1898), Baum was indeed a national authority on the creative practice and profession of window trimming.<sup>71</sup> William Leach goes so far as to suggest that Baum’s work in retailing “was almost as important to the development of American culture as were his Oz stories and fantasies.”<sup>72</sup> The window dresser turned children’s author was thus intimately familiar with (and equally ambivalent towards) the role of the window as an optical mechanism that can transform *display* into *desire*.

Baum’s role in advancing turn-of-the-century modern advertising techniques, and his expertise in the art of retail display—for “letting objects tell some legible story,” as his *Art of Dressing*

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<sup>70</sup> Bill Brown, *Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, 87.

<sup>71</sup> In *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors* (1900), Baum is well aware of the gendered dimension of desire and consumption. He writes: “How can a window sell goods? By placing them before the public in such a manner that the observer has a desire for them and enters the store to make the purchase. Once in, the customer may see other things she wants, and no matter how much she purchases under these conditions, the credit of the sale belongs to the window.”

<sup>72</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 55.



*Dry Goods Windows* proposes—suggests that the author has an astute awareness of the relationship between fantasy, consumer desire, and the construction of individual identity.<sup>73</sup> This triangulation that eventually played out in his fiction. Despite, or perhaps because of, his central role in visual and narrative advertising, traces of Baum’s ambivalence about modern consumer culture abound in his Oz text, articulated most explicitly in Dorothy’s well-known encounter with the opulent Emerald City. In the Emerald City, the mechanism of *glass*, for example, is also used to represent the mystification of the value of commodities. Before setting foot into the spectacular walled city,<sup>74</sup> all visitors are required to put on a pair of green glasses, which are locked in place by the Guardian of the Gates.<sup>75</sup> (The Emerald City resembles Chicago, and like the White City that was staged during the Columbian Exposition, in this first book of the series, without these green spectacles, actually is white.)<sup>76</sup> Mirroring, or creating, the near-magical quality of the department store windows in *Sister Carrie*, through these glasses, everything in this metropolis takes on the supplemental and illusory value of *greenness*. The entire city, and all of the items for sale in its “many shops,” were green. “Green candy and green popcorn were offered for sale,” Baum writes,

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<sup>73</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*. (Chicago: The Show Window Publishing Co., 1900), 223. Cited in Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and the Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows.” *Representations* 21 (1988): 106.

<sup>74</sup> The metaphor of an exclusive and guarded “walled city” is also used in Dreiser’s depiction of New York, viewed through the eyes of the declining Hurstwood—“The elegant lobbies of hotels and the glow of polished dining rooms were keeping them close within the walled city” (340)—and through the eyes of Carrie after she reaches the pinnacle of her success of Broadway: “Ah, she was in the walled city now, its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside” (449).

<sup>75</sup> Scholars have considered Baum’s green spectacles as a precursor to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, where the glasses of Eckleberg in *The Great Gatsby* symbolize the religious-like authority of advertising. Another parallel between the two texts involves Nick Carraway’s nostalgia at the end of the text, to return to the Midwest, to the “dark fields of the republic.” See Laura Barrett, “From Wonderland to Wasteland: ‘The Wonderful Wizard of Oz’, ‘The Great Gatsby’, and the New American Fairytale,” *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 42, No.2 (2006): 150-180. Also see Dennis Duffy “To Glow with Bright Colours: Jimmy Gatz’s Trip to Oz,” *Journal of English Studies*, Vol.3 (2001-2002): 65-79.

<sup>76</sup> Although this is an inconsistency, in later books in the series, the Emerald City appears green without the illusion of the glasses.

“as well as green shoes, green hats, and green clothes of all sorts. At one place a girl was selling green lemonade, and when the children bought it Dorothy could see that they paid for it with green pennies.”<sup>77</sup> In his brilliant analysis of the way Baum’s book invokes and revels in consumer desire even as it appears to enact a “conventional criticism of the commodity fetish,” Stuart Culver points out a relatively minor scene towards the book’s close that also performs this logic of desire and display. In this brief chapter, Dorothy encounters the Dainty China Country, a miniature pastoral village on the Southern edge of Oz’s Great Desert in which everything and everyone is made of delicate china.



Fig 2.3: “These people are all made of delicate china.” W.W. Denslow, Pen and ink drawing for L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, New York Public Library, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art.

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<sup>77</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 202.

At the start of her journey through this foreign territory, Dorothy catches an admiring glimpse of an animated China Princess doll who immediately runs away from the young girl and her cohort. “You are so beautiful,” Dorothy cries as she chases the painted figurine. “I am sure I could love you dearly. Won’t you let me carry you back to Kansas, and stand you on Aunt Em’s mantel? I could carry you in my basket.” To this the doll replies, “That would make me very unhappy.” She continues:

You see, here in our country we live contentedly, and can talk and move around as we please. But whenever any of us are taken away our joints at once stiffen, and we can only stand straight and look pretty. Of course that is all that is expected of us when we are on mantels and cabinets and drawing-room tables, but our lives are much pleasanter here in our own country.<sup>78</sup>

Acknowledging the princess’s plea, Dorothy says goodbye and continues down the delicate road. Dorothy’s immediate concession to the doll’s request is an indication of the pleasure she derives not from the ultimate consumption of the object, but rather from its mode of display. As Stuart Culver notes, even this deferral is closely linked to the aesthetics of advertising. Dorothy *wants* the object, but she wants it “in the window as a useless commodity in the most useless of situations.” Thus, contradicting those readings of Baum’s tale that view Dorothy as an allegory or reflection of the author’s alleged Populist sympathies (where value is based on individual labor and real necessity) “It seems that Dorothy has learned not only to accept the inevitability of humbug but actually to desire the theatrical supplemental commodity just because it is a blank screen against which the pure value of the window appears, awakening a desire that is *not referred to any need*.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> L. Frank Baum, *Wizard*, 313-314.

<sup>79</sup> Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and the Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows. *Representations* 21 (1988): 111.

The most striking detail in this scene, though, is Dorothy's inadvertent revision, indeed *renovation*, of her own Kansas home space. The mantle on which Dorothy wishes to display the figurine is an imagined addition to the one-room farmhouse that, as described in part one of this essay, contains only "a rusty looking cooking stove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds." The newly imagined mantle here is the site through which Dorothy's new understanding of the relationship between herself and domestic objects—and the ability of these objects to narrate the personality and values of the subjects that possess them (the *voice of the so-called inanimate* that is literalized in both Baum and Dreiser)—is articulated.<sup>80</sup>

In thinking about this Anglo-American dialogue between gender, space, and material culture, consider a similar re-imagining of home via consumer objects that occurs Virginia Woolf's essay "A Street Haunting" (1930). Similar to Dreiser's *Carrie*, the female protagonist in Woolf's essay feels stifled by and somewhat abandoned in the intimate spaces of domestic life—feeling more "at home" in exterior urban spaces. Since the gendered associations of public and private space circumscribe the ways in which women can freely navigate spaces outside the home, it is under the pretense of having to run an errand that Woolf's narrator justifies her presence in the London streets. Before embarking on this errand, though, the narrator reflects briefly on the material objects that are displayed on her mantle:

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<sup>80</sup> In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen observes emerging modes of consumption and display. In particular, he suggests that the home had become the decorative property most responsible for displaying conspicuous leisure in the domestic sphere. It may also be productive here to consider Dorothy's experience in the Dainty China Country in relation to Lori Merish's discussion of *Carrie*'s "incorporation" in the department store in *Sister Carrie*. She writes: "What we are witnessing here is the making of the modern American consumer whose "civilized" desires constitute a salient marker of national identity and increasingly appeared—in political discourse as well as advertisements—as both motive and justification for U.S. imperial expansion" ("Engendering Naturalism," 320).

That bowl on the mantelpiece, for instance, was bought at Mantua on a windy day. We were leaving the shop when the sinister old woman plucked at our skirts and said she would find herself starving one of these days, but, "Take it!" she cried, and thrust the blue and white china bowl into our hands as if she never wanted to be reminded of her quixotic generosity. So, guiltily, but suspecting nevertheless how badly we had been fleeced, we carried it back to the little hotel where, in the middle of the night the innkeeper quarreled so violently with his wife that we all leant out into the courtyard to look, and saw the vines laced about among the pillars and the stars white in the sky.<sup>81</sup>

Through the act of attaching narratives to material artifacts, domestic objects here summon images of the protagonist's former self and highlight various absences. These memories, then, enacted via material objects, contribute to the sense of isolation and containment that she associates with domestic space. Each of these objects represents a time and a place that, as Woolf's narrator concedes, is now "stabilized, stamped like a coin indelibly among a million that slipped by imperceptively."<sup>82</sup> The feminized space of home, here, is imagined as one of stasis rather than movement, of history rather than progress.<sup>83</sup>

Outside of the home, however, while gazing into shop window displays "with no thought of buying," the narrator imaginatively constructs new interior domestic spaces:

One may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall. That alabaster bowl shall stand on a carved table in the window. Our merrymaking shall be reflected in that thick round mirror. But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Virginia Woolf, "A Street Haunting: A London Adventure," in *The Death of the Moth: and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1942).

<sup>82</sup> Woolf, "A Street Haunting," 21.

<sup>83</sup> For discussion of the gendering of these binaries, see especially Doreen Massey *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

<sup>84</sup> Woolf, "A Street Haunting," 27.

Lured by the world of goods behind the glass of shop windows, Woolf's narrator, like Dorothy in the Dainty China Country, momentarily reconstructs her home and her relationship to it. Where before her home was site of loneliness and containment, when it is re-imagined alongside a new "thick round mirror," it now becomes a place of fantasy—not only a site of "merrymaking" but also of companionship, since it is "our merrymaking" that the mirror would ostensibly reflect. Consuming vicariously, reveling in the world of objects behind the window but rejecting their ultimate consumption, Woolf's narrator is relieved to be "under no obligation to possess" these objects. It is the desire itself that she is after, not its ultimate satisfaction, for she recognizes that to actually purchase these items, to take them out of the context of commercial display, would strip them of their central value—a value that does not comply with either the exchange or use-value dichotomy.

In *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (1984), Philip Fisher writes that "The idea of property is irrelevant and we often feel suddenly indifferent to things once we get them home or to a place once we have voyaged there. (...) With property a person absorbs a thing into his life. Instead we seek to be absorbed temporarily into the magical life of the things."<sup>85</sup> As articulated in the desperate plea of Dorothy's porcelain princess whose "joints at once stiffen" when taken out of her country, in the *actual* home, things are stripped of the animate life they enjoyed while on display. Once goods are purchased, taken out of their commercial context and brought home, they become emblems of the past rather than the potential future(s). Thus, it is from within this state of suspension, of perpetual longing and deferral, that the ultimate pleasure of consumption unfolds. "There is nothing in this world more delightful," writes Dreiser of his melancholy protagonist, "than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed

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<sup>85</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts*, 134.

of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscious or want of decision.”<sup>86</sup> This characterization of Carrie’s disposition as she strolls leisurely throughout the department store displays, her heart “warm with desire,” could just as well describe Dorothy’s mood as she glimpses her beloved China trinket. It is only from within a momentary state of fantasy and suspension that the fulfillment of the desire for *home*, as a site of renewal and progress *or* as a site of return, can be entertained.

There are traces of Dreiser’s “voice of the inanimate” in Alan Trachtenberg’s description of late-century visual advertising’s ability to “endow goods with a language of their own, a language of promise radically new in the history of man-made things. If the advertisement aimed to make consumption of a particular product habitual, it also aimed to make habitual the identification of products with something else, with *ideas, feelings, status*” (my emphasis).<sup>87</sup> Keeping this in mind, I would like to return in closing to the oft-cited scene in *Sister Carrie* in which Carrie rocks by the window at her Ogden Place suite.

At her window she thought it over, rocking to and fro and gazing out across the lamplit ark toward the lamplit houses on Warren Avenue and Ashland Boulevard. She was too wrought up to care to go down to eat, too pensive to do aught but rock and sing. Some old tunes crept to her lips and as she sang them her heart sank. She longed and longed and longed. It was now for the old cottage room in Columbia City, now the mansion up on the Shore Drive, now the fine dress of some lady, now the elegance of some scene. She was sad beyond measure and yet uncertain, wishing and fancying. Finally it seemed as if all her state was one of loneliness and forsakenness and she could scarce refrain from trembling at the lip. She hummed and hummed as the moments went by, sitting in the shadow by the window, and was therein as happy, though she could not perceive it, as she ever would be.<sup>88</sup>

Reproducing the sensation of longing that she experiences as she stands before department store

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<sup>86</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 67.

<sup>87</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Incorporation*, 135.

<sup>88</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 116.

displays, for *Sister Carrie*, even from within domestic space, (the rocking chair functioning as a potent symbol of domestic ideology), the window functions as a mechanism that invites fantasy and structures desire. The “elegant scenes” and goings-on outside are framed like so many show window vignettes, “lamplit” and behind impenetrable glass. This melancholic moment exemplifies Carrie’s effort to “satisfy a metaphysical longing with physical objects,”<sup>89</sup> and in particular with domestic structures—the “old cottage,” she imagines, would enclose and protect her; the “mansion up on the Shore Drive” would attest to her worth. As this chapter has suggested, the name that is frequently ascribed to that “metaphysical longing,” or to the (always fictional) notion of its fulfillment, is *home*.

### **Conclusion:**

Bill Brown contends that, “as a phrase, a *sense of things* can designate the sensation of thingness. It can also designate meaning, or the understanding (often the intuitive discernment) of an existing set of relations. (‘So, do you have a sense of things? What is your sense of things?’)”<sup>90</sup> I contend that there is a constructive parallel between Brown’s notion of a “sense of things” and this chapter’s use of the phrase a “sense of home.” At the end of each of the novels that frame this chapter, neither Dorothy nor Carrie have achieved the kinds of homecoming for which they have so hopefully longed throughout their respective journeys. Baum’s final chapter, “Home Again,” in which Dorothy at long last has returned to her beloved Kansas, mirrors the minimal description of home with which the author begins the story. In fact, the entire chapter is less than half a page long, and the place to which she finally returns is a different, newly built farmhouse, since the

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<sup>89</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 51.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Brown, “A Sense of Things,” 17.



structure of her original dwelling, rudely uprooted by the cyclone and dropped onto an evil witch, will forever remain in Munchkin Country. On the other hand, by the end of Dreiser's text, Carrie, now a burgeoning Broadway star, has been invited to reside permanently in the lavish Waldorf Astoria hotel. Living in a hotel, the ultimate embodiment of liminality and transience, not only is Carrie a human advertisement for the franchise (cementing her role as both a subject and object of exchange), but the very fact of her permanently residing in a hotel ensures that she will forever be, quite literally, a guest in her own home. Both Oz (in which Dorothy's house is permanently, uncannily rooted), and the hotel, (specifically designed to mirror the domestic sphere while eliminating any trace of the work involved in reproducing and maintaining it) embody at once both familiarity and strangeness, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*,<sup>91</sup> rootlessness and stasis.

Perhaps "There's no place like home," but the rich polysemic value of this phrase works to complicate the idea of home itself, making evident its tricky slippage between places, persons, emotions, and objects—between sites that are both real and imaginary. What if Kansas is not the place in which Dorothy ultimately feels *at home*? What if Carrie, who feels claustrophobic, blatantly *irritated* in the traditional domestic sphere—the working-class home of her Columbia City family, the Van Buren flat in which her sister, a wife and mother, carries the "burden of toil," the multiple rental spaces in New York in which she refuses to "keep house" while Hurstwood "wait(s) to live upon her labor"—actually feels more *at home* outside of these spaces. Further, could not Oz or Carrie's hotel in fact *be* the "no place" (the heterotopic *non-places*, like the Columbian Exposition

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<sup>91</sup> See Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny." There is another interesting parallel found in this essay, considering this chapter's attention to material culture and Dreiser's "voice of the inanimate," in which part of Freud's definition of what constitutes the uncanny involves the experience when "a lifeless object" appears to become animated. Freud contends, then, that the sensation of the uncanny might surface at moments in which the boundary between animate and inanimate has become blurred. This theme will be revisited in the following chapter.

and like the department store) that are “like” home. There’s [a] no-place [that feels] like home. Or, as this chapter has argued, perhaps home is first and foremost a feeling, something that cannot be spatially or geographically located. There is no *place* like home. Or, as I’ve begun to argue here and will explore further in the following chapters, what if home, at this moment in U.S. history, had become itself a commodity or a symbolic fiction, something the desire for which is by its very nature (as a commodity within the discourse of capitalist exchange), unfulfillable? What if it had always been so? There is no (such) place (as) home.<sup>92</sup>

This chapter also troubles many familiar readings of the two individual texts. With a central focus either on Dorothy’s relentless nostalgia or Carrie’s insatiable materialism, such readings would suggest that there is a fundamental opposition in the ways the two characters perceive of the relationship between self, objects, and ultimately *home*.<sup>93</sup> One, with a backwards gaze, wants for nothing but to return to what (and where) she was; the other, face towards the future, desires everything, money and consumer goods, so that she can be someone and *somewhere* else. But this is not quite the case. Midway through Dreiser’s novel, as a downtrodden Carrie gazes from her rocking chair out into the city streets, she conjures her final image of Columbia City—of

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<sup>92</sup> See also Helen Kim, “Strategic Credulity: Oz as Mass Culture Parable” in *Cultural Critique* 33 (1996): 213-233; Cara Hood, “Rhetoricizing Kansas after Oz,” in *Nebula*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2007): 202-214; and Jerry Griswold, “No Place But Home: The Wizard of Oz.” *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (1987): 462-75.

<sup>93</sup> In such familiar readings of *Sister Carrie* and *The Wizard of Oz*, the former is an “unequivocal endorsement,” as Walter Benn Michaels has written, of the “unrestrained capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” The latter, on the other hand, according to the school of criticism stemming from Henry Littlefield’s “populist parable” reading, is rather a critique of this materialism and commodity fetishism. See Walter Benn Michaels, “Sister Carrie’s Popular Economy,” in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 35; and Henry Littlefield, “The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism” *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1964): 47-58; Fred Erisman “L. Frank Baum and the Progressive Dilemma.” *American Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1968): 616; and Hugh Rockoff, “The Wizard of Oz as Monetary Allegory.” *Journal of Political Economy* 98, no. 4 (1990): 1-16.

which, we recall, there are very few throughout the novel. Carrie sees her rural homeplace, here, as “part of something that could not be again,” and she “looks for no refuge in that direction.”<sup>94</sup> Recognizing the impossibility of return, Carrie imagines home *nostalgically*. Like the mythic frontier in Turner’s narrative, home in Carrie’s forlorn window-side vision represents a moment passed, something that is now inaccessible. Dorothy, on the other hand, that poster child of nostalgia, ends her voyage through Oz with an imaginative reconstruction of her home into a middle-class bourgeois interior. The Midwest farmhouse no longer her referent, it is the home for which she now longs, rather than the enchanted Oz, that has become a fantasy. And indeed it is Dorothy’s new taste for ornamental objects of domestic/self display that finally enables her vision of *home*, like the image of the single house in Dreiser’s personified Chicago which stands as a “pioneer of the populous ways to be,” to assume the language of progress rather than a “rustic backwardness.” It is thus this revised image of home that enables young Dorothy to embrace a hopeful vision of the *progress to come* to her presently gray and dreary Kansas.

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<sup>94</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 251.



Fig. 2.4: Screenshot. *The Wizard of Oz* MGM (1939)

But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

-Walter Benjamin, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*

## CHAPTER 3

### **“The Sheer Genius of the Electric Chandelier”: The Lamp and the Promise of Home in Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer***

Electricity is destined to become the motive power of the world. The future advance of civilization will be by electrical lines.

-L. Frank Baum, *The Master Key*

It seems that the evocation of a lamp is certain to resonate in the souls of readers who love to remember.

-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exhibition in Paris, in 1900, American historian Henry Adams found himself lingering, both terrified and transfixed, before the forty-foot dynamos—those massive steel generators, created in the nineteenth century, that converted mechanical energy into electric current. As detailed in his 1907 autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams*, in the chapter entitled “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” Adams recalls within this experience his sensation of being at a historical crossroads, on the precipice of the twentieth century and “caught between two kingdoms of force,” as he explains.<sup>1</sup>

Using the idea of “forces” as a narrative device to outline what he called a “dynamic theory of history,” in Henry Adams’ account, the first of these opposing moral “kingdoms of force” is

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams published and circulated *The Education* independently in 1907. It was widely distributed and commercially circulated after his death in 1918. The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1919.

embodied in the medieval goddess figure of the Virgin. An icon of Christianity in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, embodying reproduction, that “greatest and most mysterious of all energies,” the Virgin symbolizes, for Adams, the unity of the past. At the same time that the historian celebrates Woman and this feminine power, he also considers it to be a relic of a simpler, more noble, and perhaps less “American” past; for “In America,” he writes, “neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force—at most as sentiment. No American had ever been truly afraid of either.”<sup>2</sup> If the Virgin indexes the erotic and unifying force of the past, the Dynamo, on the other hand, that “symbol of ultimate energy,” is a material manifestation of the “multiplicity” of the new century—of the “masculine” and *mechanical* forces that threaten to undermine older ideas of selfhood, and of a unified social and spiritual order. Though still signifying a certain *kind* of energy, even an “occult” power—like the cross, the medieval cathedral, the Virgin—the dynamo, turning motion into electricity, becomes an index not of nature’s awesome power but of humans’ increasing power over it. “It is a new century,” Adams wrote in a letter to his friend shortly after his encounter at the Paris Exhibition, “Electricity is its God.”<sup>3</sup> In short, prostrate before the dynamo, his “historical neck broken,” Henry Adams is at a total loss, unable to locate any historical continuity or organizing principal in the modern order of things.

It is through the language of electricity, here and throughout his *Autobiography*, that Adams, a child and historian of the nineteenth century awkwardly stumbling into the twentieth, expresses his own sense of “isolation and disillusionment” amidst the “chaos” of turn-of-the-century America,

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 383.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Adams, *The Letters of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 395.

with its “sudden irruption of forces totally new.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as both a visible and social force, widespread public electrification in turn of the century urban America made plain one of the defining dilemmas of modernity: enhanced possibilities for self-invention and human connection are coupled with a growing sense of alienation and displacement.<sup>5</sup>

In Steven Millhauser’s 1996 Pulitzer Prize-winning historical realist novel *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*, which takes place during the turn-of-the-century boom of American invention and industry, the builder-protagonist encounters a similar paradox and a parallel sense of being lost in a maelstrom of forces. This disorientation is characterized by his self-proclaimed “need to hold on to something, lest he would surely be lost.”<sup>6</sup> Fittingly, the *dynamo*, as a potent symbol of modernity, is also key figure in *Martin Dressler*. In particular, embedded in Adams’ lament in “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” and, as I will show, in Millhauser’s text, is a tacit acknowledgement of a *gendered distinction between the past and the present*.<sup>7</sup> Both texts use the dynamo and the specter of electricity to give shape and voice to ambivalences surrounding other, related distinctions: between nostalgia and progress; nature and civilization; American industry and European taste and tradition. In other words, in their implicit gendering of historical processes, and of the affective and nostalgic registers that can emerge in the *telling* of such stories,

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Adams, *Education*, 381-82. In Chapter XXXIII of *Education*, titled “A Dynamic Theory of History of History and A Law of Acceleration,” he further details this sense of powerless among these modern “electrified” powers: “Forces grasped his wrists and flung him about as if he had hold of a live wire or a runaway automobile.”

<sup>5</sup> Scott McQuire, “Dream Cities: The Uncanny Powers of Electric Light,” *SCAN Journal of Media Arts and Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 2004), no pagination.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* (New York: Crown, 1996), 292.

<sup>7</sup> For helping me to think through and articulate these competing ideas of nostalgia and progress in Henry Adams’ “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” I am indebted to Professor Magdalena Zaborowska and many of the students of her undergraduate course at the University of Michigan entitled “Space, Story, and the American Self,” for which I was also the Graduate Student Instructor during the fall semester of 2011. It was Professor Zaborowska who also led me to Steven Millhauser’s novel.

both narratives use objects to give form and expression to these multiple anxieties of the present in relation to the past.

Signaling a contemporary literary nostalgia for past narratives, and in particular for the urban American novels of the turn-of-the-(last)-century, Millhauser's novel fictionalizes the same historical moment in and about which Theodore Dreiser and L. Frank Baum write, and it traces the life of its protagonist through the first two decades of the twentieth century. Born in New York City to German immigrants, Millhauser's title character, Martin Dressler, comes of age at around the same time that Dreiser's Carrie Meeber is learning to navigate the same city. With different motivations and outcomes that are intricately scripted by discourses of gender and national identity, both "dreamer" protagonists enact an archetypal rags-to-riches narrative, and both are driven by a relentless longing to stake a claim, to recognize *themselves*, in the same rapidly urbanizing landscape that also threatens to alienate them. The allusion to dreaming here is a double entendre. It refers to a literal dream state, as both Carrie and Martin Dressler are characterized by their frequent drifting, whether in sleep or daydream, into imaginative worlds of reverie. But also this dream indexes the mythic Algeresque "American dream," with all its attendant suggestions of modern, self-made "manliness."<sup>8</sup> It is important to consider how the gendering of both the "dreamer" and the "dream" itself instructs each narrative, circumscribing the contours of each character's desire, and revealing markedly different relationships with, and experiences of, urban, domestic, and national space.

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<sup>8</sup> For detailed accounts of the changing definition and ideals of American masculinity at various moments throughout U.S. history, see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).



As Steven Millhauser points out on the very first page of his novel, for example, Martin Dressler comes of age at a moment when, “On any street corner in America you might see some ordinary-looking citizen who was destined to invent a new type of bottle cap or tin can, start a chain of five-cent stores, sell a faster and better elevator, or open a fabulous new department store.”<sup>9</sup> In this early passage, the “destinies” onto which each of these “ordinary citizens” seem to stumble—*i.e.* the inventor, the entrepreneur, the engineer, the businessman—are specifically *modern* professions, each emerging out of new economic, technological and spatial structures of late-nineteenth century urban America. That the discourse surrounding these professional aspirations was always at the same time a discourse of American manhood is emphasized in the fact that each of the categories Millhauser highlights in the above passage—again the inventor, the entrepreneur, the engineer, the businessman—refer not only to fields of work but also to particular *types* of masculine subjectivities. The “citizen” in this discussion is decidedly male, just as the successful construction and design of Dressler’s buildings rely, at each stage of their completion, on “frontier” discourses of masculine power and spatial conquest. The first part of this chapter, then, will look at the gendering of interior and exterior space and the ways in which Martin Dressler’s incessant drive to *build* in this novel, reflecting a more generalized “modern” desire to conquer and master space, engages the intimately intertwined discourses of American manhood and the Turnerian project of nation building at the turn of the century.

Just as the tensions between nature and civilization, past and future, nostalgia and progress, manifest *spatially* in Millhauser’s novel—in discussions of exterior and interior spaces and the gendered values associated with each—so too are they manifest in material objects. The second part of this chapter looks closely at the presence and literary function of a single domestic object in

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 1.

*Martin Dressler*—the lamp—as both a decorative domestic object as well as an object of technology. Beyond its literary and material presence in this chapter, the lamp, as I will show, becomes an occasion for bringing together various stories, figures, and methodologies.

In his last published work, *La Flamme d'une Chandelle* (The Flame of a Candle), Gaston Bachelard meditates on the poetics of fire and candlelight, contrasting the poetry of lamplight (what he calls “humanized light”) with the mechanical brutality of electric light (which he calls “administered light”). In this brief narrative of technological progress, Bachelard is struck by the way the single word, “lamp,” signifies two different objects—an oil lamp and an electric lamp—and he highlights the way each object encases a completely different capacity for inciting reverie, or the poetic imagination. “What a disaster it is for reverie,” he writes, “when the names, the old names of objects begin to change, to become attached to things completely different from the good old things on the old whatnot shelf!” He continues: “Those who lived in the century now past say the word lamp with lips different from those of today (...) The electric light bulb will never provoke in us the reveries of this living lamp, which made light out of oil. We have entered an age of administered light. Our only role is to flip a switch. We are no more than the mechanical subject of a mechanical gesture.”<sup>10</sup>

Here, Bachelard’s condensed narrative of technological development is framed by and coalesced into a single object. In *Martin Dressler*, Steven Millhauser captures and reproduces the same nostalgic language that infuses these earlier non-fiction accounts (as in Bachelard and Adams, for example) of the disorientation and growing depersonalization between subject and object that

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<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 63. Bachelard’s lamentation of the lost world of the oil lamp is bathed in a nostalgia that echoes Adams’ treatment of once-powerful force of the Virgin figure. “But these reveries of light no longer belong to our age,” Bachelard mourns, “I recall them here only in order to draw attention to *an unknown and lost oneirism, one that has become a matter of history, the knowledge of an old knowledge*” (my emphasis).

emerge in the process of modern industrialization. Indeed, this the contrast between the two technologies, older forms of gas light and modern incandescent or electric light, is a key tension in Millhauser's text. Throughout the novel, the author is exceedingly careful to specify the ways in which each space in the text is illuminated, where electric lighting is associated with the city, public spaces, technology and progress, the nation's future. Gaslight, on the other hand, is associated most strongly with women, sex, private interior rooms, and nostalgic sites of childhood memory.

Debates about the use and aesthetics of the incandescent lamp versus its gas-lit predecessor highlight in particular the ways in which electricity—as both a natural and social force inhabiting objects—became a powerful metonym for anxieties about modern progress writ large. As Vivian Wagner explains, it was “around and through the language and use of electricity some of the major early twentieth-century anxieties and emotions found expression; literally, the language of electricity is the language of the frontier.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, many scholars have discussed the ways in which widespread electrification at the turn of the century functioned as a catalyst for the dramatic acceleration of industrial production, and the technology radically altered the public's relationship with both time and space.<sup>12</sup> In public spaces, for example, new modes of spectacular lighting, whether purposed for advertising, entertainment, or basic utility, surely contributed to what Walter Benjamin would refer to as the “dreamlike” character of modern cities. At the same time, these visions were becoming, as David Nye contends, a “characteristic part of a hypertrophied national self-perception, mingling with the most revered natural landscapes and man-made

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<sup>11</sup> Vivian Wagner, "Unsettling Oz: Technological Anxieties in the Novels of L. Frank Baum," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006): 30.

<sup>12</sup> David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992). For an extensive history of street lighting, and in particular on the social implications of the switch from gas to electric light in public spaces, see also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

symbols, eroding the sense of what is natural, possible or real.”<sup>13</sup> Focusing in particular on the *lamp*, both as a decorative domestic object as well as an object of technology, I argue that it is through the conflicting discourses surrounding gas and electric lighting Millhauser brings to bear the kind of deep ambivalence towards modern progress for which Henry Adams finds material expression in the symbols of the Dynamo and the Virgin.



Figure 3.1: General Electric's Dynamo. *Photographs of the World's Fair*. Chicago: The Werner Co., 1894.

Seven years before his dark epiphany before the Gallery of Machines at the Paris exhibition, Henry Adams had also “lingered long among the dynamos” in the Electricity Building at the 1893

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<sup>13</sup> David Nye, *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 391.

World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.<sup>14</sup> Electricity—which not only powered much of the Exposition, as *invisible force*, but which also was a stunning spectacle in its own right, as *visible ornament*—was a relatively new idea and power in the early 1890s. Although Thomas Edison obtained his first patent for an incandescent lamp in 1880, electricity was still the subject of public fear and uncertainty, and the use of incandescent lighting in private homes was extremely rare even well into the first quarter of the twentieth century: it was a powerful class symbol and a privilege reserved only for the very wealthy and an object of luxury and conspicuous display.<sup>15</sup>

As Henry Adams pondered the dynamos and the seventy-foot-high tower of light bulbs in the Electricity Building, just across the North Canal, in the Fair's Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, designer and craftsman Louis Comfort Tiffany displayed several early examples of his stained-glass Art Nouveau lamps, which would begin to be commercially produced two years later. Designed for use in the domestic interior, the electric capacity of these lamps was deliberately downplayed: first, the opaque jewel-toned colors worked to soften the glare of the incandescent bulb; second, the elaborate designs of the glass shades depicted the natural environment, flowers and bulbs, plants and forest. Both of these details demonstrate the importance, for manufacturers of domestic lighting, of camouflaging the product's mechanical parts. Indeed, Tiffany's most celebrated contribution to the Exposition was the Byzantine-inspired glass-inlaid chapel interior, which he commissioned specifically for the Fair. Of the myriad awards this showpiece gathered, one was granted on account of its "imaginative adaptation of the electrification of its imposing

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<sup>14</sup> Henry Adams, *Education*, 340.

<sup>15</sup> Nye, *Electrification*, 242. See also Judith Adams, "The Promotion of New Technology through Fun and Spectacle: Electricity at the World's Columbian Exhibition," *Journal of American Culture* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer 1995): 45.

chandelier.”<sup>16</sup> Casting a deep green light on the chapel’s marble and white-glass mosaic alter, this massive ten-foot and 1000 pound electric chandelier formed the shape of a cross. Imitating the artistic and sacred elements of medieval European cathedrals (Tiffany had studied the stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral, that same religious monument by which Henry Adams was so poignantly moved), the artist/manufacturer’s use of new glass techniques and electric technology aimed to give his work the quality of authentic old masterpieces. As a *businessman*, however (the central purpose of the entire exhibit, of course, was to sell his product),<sup>17</sup> L. C. Tiffany was astutely aware of the promise and marketability of masking technological innovations in the guise of classic historical forms.

In Steven Millhauser’s novel, Martin Dressler’s entrepreneurial success derives in large part from what seems to be an intuitive sense that for the American hotel business to thrive, its interiors must contain nostalgic elements of the past while still promising that the latest technological advances are at the occupants’ disposal. This inspires Dressler’s revelation about what he calls “the sheer genius of the electric chandelier.” With its brilliant “combination of Mr. Edison and the courts of Europe,” for example, Martin Dressler sees within this object its unique ability to obscure the boundaries between past and the present, and to encapsulate and assuage the public’s ambivalence surrounding technological progress.<sup>18</sup> Martin Dressler thus caters to, and indeed trades upon, this double-logic of modernity—the nation’s confounding urge (and indeed *his*

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<sup>16</sup> Some remains from the “Tiffany Chapel” are on display in an ongoing exhibit at *The Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art in Winter Park, Florida*. See information and exhibit literature at <http://www.morsemuseum.org/louis-comfort-tiffany/tiffany-chapel>.

<sup>17</sup> In *A Synopsis of the exhibit of the Tiffany Glass and Decorating company in the American section of the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building at the World’s Fair Jackson Park, Chicago, Illinois 1893*, Louis Comfort Tiffany wrote: “We have endeavored, in our exhibit, to bring before the eyes of the visitors to the World’s Fair various objects from different departments in order to illustrate the scope of our business, which embraces all forms of ecclesiastical and domestic embellishment.” (Tiffany Studios: New York, 1893): 1.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer* (New York: Crown, 1996), 70.

own) “to live in two worlds at once,” as he explains, in “a new world of steel and dynamos,” on the one hand, and “an older world of stone arches and hand-carved wood,” on the other.<sup>19</sup>

While businessmen and corporations may have institutionalized electricity as a commodity, as David Nye explains, “there were other conceptions of what electricity was and how it ought to be integrated into American society.” Whereas the ambivalence of some intellectuals, as we have seen above in the figures of Henry Adams and Gaston Bachelard, “had little effect on the construction of the system, it took on resonance as a theme to be countered in advertising, product design, and early expositions, which often emphasized the harmony between electricity and tradition.”<sup>20</sup> I argue that the lamp—in its literary representation as well as its physical design and images in advertising—demonstrates the capacity to underscore, and potentially reconcile, the competing ideas of nostalgia and technological progress, the Virgin and the Dynamo, both within and beyond Millhauser’s text. With this in mind, this chapter’s final section extends this critique by looking at representations of the lamp—as both metaphor and materiality—in other cultural sites throughout the twentieth century and into our own. Looking at several examples from visual art and advertising texts—commissioned by corporations from General Electric at the start of the twentieth century to Ikea at the start of the twenty-first—I emphasize the ways in which this particular domestic object *continues* to embody these powerful associations.

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<sup>19</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> David Nye, *Electrifying America*, 182.

## Part One: The Arcades, The Hotel, and the Gendering of Interior and Exterior Space

He's right about the spirit of a hotel—you can feel it right away, almost before you step into the lobby—but I'd say he underestimates things like rugs, armchairs, paint, all these material things. They're part of the spirit too...a sort of, well, material way of expressing something that isn't material at all.

-Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*

Steven Millhauser's tale aims to engage a distinctly "national" narrative. My analysis of how objects and social spaces function in this novel—not only as material sites but also as powerful symbols that are imbued with complex cultural meanings—is nonetheless strengthened by the theoretical methods outlined by German philosopher Walter Benjamin in the first half of the twentieth century. In his *Arcades Project* (trans. 1999), a copious posthumously published collection of essay fragments and quotations, Benjamin looks closely at the remnants of nineteenth-century material culture in order to build an alternative archive for understanding the past. In particular, he is interested in tracing the origins and history of Euro-American mass consumer culture. For Benjamin, the urban panorama of nineteenth-century Paris is a demonstrative backdrop for what Marx called the "fetishism of commodities"—a process wherein "a particular social relationship between people takes on the phantasmagoric [*illusory, false*] form of a relationship between things."<sup>21</sup> Reflecting mainly on Paris, and a bit on Berlin, Benjamin investigates his own childhood memories and he sees a kind of revolutionary character embedded in discarded or outmoded material remnants, such as the all but defunct arcades which housed, in Benjamin's era as today, the traces of a "bygone era." Ultimately, I find Benjamin's work useful here because of the way it reflects a spirit of the age that Steven Millhauser seems eager to capture in *Martin Dressler*. In addition, despite the vast difference in period and form, Benjamin's criticism and Millhauser's

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, qtd. in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 213.



fiction both firmly acknowledge the importance and narrative capacity of *objects*. Both writers look closely at the detritus or residue of the past, and both frame their narratives within an emerging world of commodities—a world in which things themselves begin to take on an objective life of their own. Indeed, objects do not simply embellish the different “stories” of these diverse figures: in many ways they *are* the story.

Throughout the *Arcades Project*, which consumed Walter Benjamin from 1927 until his tragic suicide in 1940, the author finds intimate connections between the modern department store and the Parisian Arcades—those temples of commerce encased in glass and iron, “houses with no outside,” that transformed urban public space in the first half of the nineteenth century. Both structures, the arcade and the department store, he writes, contain in themselves “a city, a world in miniature.”<sup>22</sup> As we have seen in the vast department stores in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* as well as within the great fairs of the nineteenth century, with their stunning visual displays and the imaginative pleasures they evoke for the consumer/spectator, the business of these urban behemoths involved both the creation and the selling of dreams.

A reference to this free-floating desire that is awakened by the alluring display of consumer goods, Steven Millhauser’s *Martin Dressler* opens with its title character behind a glass show window. It is the summer of 1881 as Martin Dressler, then nine years old, gazes at the New York street from behind the window of his father’s cigar shop. “Separated from his nose by just a single sheet of carefully washed glass,” the young boy is rapt as always in silent wonder, watching this framed vignette of city life. So transfixed by the colorful spectacle, he momentarily forgets why he is standing in the window at all...today was to be his window dressing debut. Already

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 31.

demonstrating an acute understanding of business and the art of manufacturing desire, young Dressler had fashioned a cigar tree out of wood and wire to display the store's merchandise, and his father promised to showcase his creation in the front window of the shop.

Although the original idea for the sculpture was his own, the boy admits that it was inspired by a "gorgeous display from the windows of the big department stores that he passed with his mother on their Sunday afternoon walk." Even into his adult life, he is continually charmed by elaborate show windows and the interior displays of department stores, and each time he witnesses the "shimmer and glitter of a world behind glass," he is taken aback and inspired by these staged scenes.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, throughout Millhauser's novel, at each stage of Dressler's storybook rise to success, he continues to revisit and draw inspiration from the memories of his childhood encounters with the enchanted world of the department store.

Much as the Paris arcades are Walter Benjamin's primary images because he finds them to be "the precise material replica of the internal consciousness, or rather, the unconscious of the dreaming collective,"<sup>24</sup> such is the space of the *hotel* in Millhauser's fiction. Like the arcades, which Benjamin heralds as the predecessors of the modern department store, the hotel is also a historically specific institution of urban modernity—and each is a key site in the emerging consumer environments of mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century United States and Europe. In Millhauser's novel, the spectacle of the hotel lobby fascinated his protagonist from a very early age. Dressler was especially drawn, however, to the *idea* of the hotel, as a "great elaborate structure, a system of order, a well-planned machine that drew all these people to itself and carried them up

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<sup>23</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 3, 243.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 39.

and down in iron cages and arranged them in private rooms.”<sup>25</sup> Attracted, then, to both the structure and the “spirit” of the American hotel, Martin Dressler’s career begins at the age of fourteen, as he eschews part of his responsibilities in his father’s cigar shop in order to become the bellboy of the nearby Vanderlyn Hotel. From here, he is quickly promoted from clerk to secretary to assistant manager, but his yet-unarticulated desire for something more, always *more*, leads him to open a small lunchroom that is so successful, it eventually becomes an incredibly lucrative chain.

Still unsatisfied, he sells the cafes and takes over the “antiquated” Vanderlyn, performs a massive renovation on the site, and then one after the other erects his own elaborate hotels, each taller and more spectacular than the last: The Hotel Dressler; The New Dressler; and eventually, the immense and ultimately uninhabitable Grand Cosmopolitan. This final hotel venture, the Grand Cosmopolitan, is intended to be the ultimate materialization of his anxieties and frustrated desires, and from the perspective of the reader, the structure echoes notions of the postmodern spectacle. At play in Dressler’s never-sated desire to build wilder, larger sites, is also a vision of the more auspicious self he imagines he will become once these spatial and structural dreams are realized. The moment each of these immense architectural dreams are successfully executed, however, which is to say each time they are *built* and then *inhabited*, the project is immediately abandoned, perceived as failure, and the tireless businessman launches plans for a new structure which, he imagines, might more adequately contain his otherwise impalpable vision.

### *The “Hotel Spirit” and the Urban Frontier*

Martin Dressler’s approach to the modern hotel business stands in stark opposition to that of his first boss, Alexander Westerhoven, then manager of the Vanderlyn hotel, noted for his

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 26.

“secret desire to stop the city from its rush into the new century.” In *Martin Dressler*, it is through Westerhoven’s stance on both the hotel institution and its interior objects, that we can see the ways in which material forms become burdened with the obligation to encase this nostalgic desire—a desire for a unified sense of self which recalls, again, Heidegger’s notion of at-home-ness or being-in-the-world. Although “there was always a ground of the solid and practical” in his manager’s arguments:

Martin knew that they were arguing less about elevators or telephones or expenditures than about something else: they were arguing about the manager’s secret desire to stop the city from its rush into the new century, his desire to return to his childhood parlor with its soft dark rug, its heavy curtains and vases of heavy-headed flowers, its mother with her bag of knitting in an easy chair by the window. Mr. Westerhoven had taken to sighing at the thought of the new department stores with their big plate-glass display windows full of fancy merchandise and had begun shopping in small out-of-the-way places, from which he would return with a hand-woven rug for his office, an old-fashioned snuff box with hand-painted porcelain Cupids on the box lid, a walking stick with an ivory head carved in the shape of a monkey.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, the manager is feminized and infantilized through his association with the past, and with the bourgeois space of parlor. With his “accumulation of knickknacks,” Westerhoven also bears a resemblance to Walter Benjamin’s collector—a figure of modernity who self-identifies with the objects he accumulates and displays. As Susan Hegeman explains, at the same time that the growing culture of consumption in the latter portion of the nineteenth century was enabling individuals to rapidly enter a higher socio-economic class, this process could also be an alienating one, whereby individuals located their “real” self in a past to which they no longer belonged. This nostalgia, for a concrete sense of individual self, generated that idea that real selves had to be newly constructed, “but they were necessarily constructed within the terms of a consumer culture.” Such

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<sup>26</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 117.

claims to authenticity “were found largely in objects that seemed to hark back to a simpler pre-industrial world, such as Currier and Ives prints, nostalgic architectural forms, and antique furnishings.”<sup>27</sup> The act of collecting, in other words, becomes a way of both preserving the past and performing the self through its material objects.

In trying, and failing, to convince his manager of the need for modern renovations, Dressler concedes, however, that the “spirit of a hotel was larger and more complex than technology alone could account for.”<sup>28</sup> For he is certain that while “People like telephones and the new electric elevators and private toilets and incandescent lights,” they simultaneously desire “old-world architecture, period furniture, dim suggestions of the very world that was being annihilated by American efficiency and know-how.”<sup>29</sup> Young Dressler’s reference here to the “spirit of the hotel,” particularly as it is invoked in conjunction with the discourse of “national desire,” finds remarkable parallel with what Henry James’s called the “hotel-spirit,” which he outlines in *The American Scene* (1907).

In documenting the return to his native New York in 1905, after spending nearly three decades abroad, Henry James sees the American luxury hotel as both an architectural form and a social force at the turn of the twentieth century—a site with the capacity to both reflect and produce “national” subjectivities. In the following passage, which James writes of the lavish Waldorf Astoria, the hotel refers not only to a new way of living in modern America, it is also the very embodiment or personification of national aspiration:

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Hegeman, “Shopping for Identities: ‘A Nation of Nations’ and the Weak Ethnicity of Objects” *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (1991): 81. See also Miles Orville, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 70-71.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 70.

The moral in question, the high interest of the tale, is that you are in the presence of a revelation of the possibilities of the hotel—for which the American spirit has for so unprecedented a use and a value; leading it on to express so a social, indeed positively aesthetic ideal, and making it so, at this supreme pitch, a synonym for civilization, for the capture of conceived manners themselves, that one is verily tempted to ask of the hotel-spirit may not just be the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself.<sup>30</sup>

In Henry James' view, this "hotel spirit" is a social characteristic of the new economic realities of modern, turn-of-the-century American life. James's hotel, which he imagines to be a site of a specifically American brand of civilization, parallels Henry Adams' dynamo. Both are material symbols of a shift in attitude, a new world order, that deeply intrigues both figures, but in which neither can manage to feel "at home."

In an 1893 article in *Harper's Magazine*, entitled "The Childhood of Jesus," author Henry Van Dyke similarly laments this loss of home—not only the feeling of "at-home-ness," but also he mourns the loss of cultural and spiritual reverence afforded to private domestic space—once the bedrock of morality and individual character. "If there is anything which the world appears to be in danger of losing," he writes, "it is the possibility of such a home."

The false and cruel conditions of industrial competition, and the morbid overgrowth of great cities, where human lives are crowded together to the point of physical and moral suffocation, have raised an enormous barrier between great masses of mankind and *the home which their natural instincts desire and seek*. The favored classes, on the other hand, are too much alienated by false standards of happiness (...) to keep their reverence for the pure and lowly ideals of domestic life. *A new aristocracy is formed which lives in mammoth hotels*, and a new democracy which exists in gigantic tenements. Public amusements increase in splendor and frequency, but private joys grow rare and difficult, and even the capacity for them seems to be withering, at least in the two extremes of human society where *the home wears a vanishing aspect*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York and London: Harpers, 1907), 99.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Van Dyke, "The Childhood of Jesus," *Harper's Magazine* (October, 1893): 723.

For this writer, there are still “great silent masses of mankind” who have yet to be corrupted by what Henry James terms the “hotel-spirit” of America—that is, those who still “cherish the ideal of the home [as] the resting-place of love, the nursery of innocent childhood, the seed-plot of the manly virtues, defended even in the lowliest cottage against all rude intrusions and desecrating powers.” But these factions are receding daily, just as the “soul” of the nation, for Adams and James, is gradually coming to be powered by electricity, by the dynamo, by the “hotel-spirit.” What is interesting in Van Dyke’s comments in *Harper’s* is the fact that, even more forcefully than with James, the erosion (or, conversely, the preservation) of Christian, Euro-American, and “manly” virtues is figured as a natural consequence of particular types of domestic structures: “mammoth hotels,” with their “new aristocracy”; versus the “lowly cottage,” with its noble and “manly” defense against the “rude intrusions” of new industrial forces.

The hotel-spirit is indicative, for James, of a brave new (American) world that is “inseparable from the new advances in technology that not only spurred on the production of new commodities, but created inventions which themselves fueled the imagining of new structures.”<sup>32</sup> It is indeed the dawn of the skyscraper, that twentieth century architectural form emerging from nineteenth-century discourses about the moral and technological progress in the American city. As multiple scholars have discussed at length, these towers of glass and iron emerge at this moment as both pillar and fetish in turn-of-the-century cities—material testaments to modern industry and masculine power.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, “Atlantic to Pacific: James, Blackmur, Todorov, and Intercontinental Form,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 196–226.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Leslie Kanes Weisman *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Meaghan Morris, “Great Moments in Social Climbing: King Kong and the Human Fly,” in Beatriz Colomina *Sexuality & Space* (New York, N.Y.:

Recalling the perceived abundance and opportunity that epitomized Turner's frontier mentality and landscape, it is interesting to consider the first site in which Martin Dressler sets up house—a hotel suite in New York's West End, in a "wilder and newer" part of town, an "untamed neighborhood" between the Hudson River and Central Park, that seemed to Dressler as if it were "set down in the middle of nowhere." Despite being a modern hotel with modern conveniences and amenities, it directly faces a "stretch of weed grown lots where goats roamed behind ramshackle fences." In these early days when Dressler was still working at the Vanderlyn Hotel, each day as he travels to work he walks along these city streets, wild with industry and growth, and into the old lobby of an outdated hotel, he feels as though he is leaping back in time, to "a world he left long ago, a world of red horse cars carpeted with straw, of short pants and bedtime stories, of his mother's hand as they walked up Broadway."<sup>34</sup> If interior space is regressive, even *maternal* here, already it is clear that for Dressler the exterior urban scene, like the frontier, is a masculine site of progress, both rugged and fertile, and Steven Millhauser is palpably borrowing from this gendered national rhetoric. Martin Dressler is a pioneer, invigorated by the newness and possibilities of this wild landscape; indeed, he is so inspired that he erects his first hotel in this still undeveloped region of the city.

The Dressler Hotel, which opens in 1899, promises to cater to the public's desire for both the urban and the pastoral, the new *and* the old. Advertised as an "extravaganza in the wilderness," it is a "rural retreat, a peaceful outpost far from the clamor of downtown Manhattan," while still

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Princeton Architectural Press, 1992); Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, Leslie Kanes Weisman (eds), *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996); and Dolores Hayden, "Skyscraper Seduction: Skyscraper Rape," *Heresies* 1 (May 1977): 108-115.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 73-75.



easily accessible to and from the inner city. Further echoing Turner, where the Dressler Hotel on the one hand could offer a “veritable vision of a pastoral retreat,” on the other hand it would also provide “the thrilling sense of being in the forefront of the city’s *relentless northward advance*.” Located in the very “*path of progress*,” the building Martin has chosen for his self-referential masterpiece was simply “*awaiting the advance of civilization* that had already been set in motion by the announcement of a new plan for a subway under the Boulevard.”<sup>35</sup>

### ***The Heterotopia and the Dreamworld***

Similar to Walter Benjamin’s descriptions of the Arcades, Millhauser’s hotel is repeatedly described as being “dreamlike,” and both sites are privileged for their imaginative capacity to “[bring] into a single large structure an immense number of *juxtaposed objects serving a single idea*.”<sup>36</sup> In exploring the literary function of the urban hotel, particularly in the work of Siegfried Kracauer, friend and colleague of Walter Benjamin, Marc Katz explains that from the turn of the century and well into the 1920s, there was an enormous boom in hotel construction across Europe and the United States. “Hotels came to resemble cities in microcosm,” he explains, “vertical cities housing laundries, valet services, barbers, gymnasiums, travel offices, drug stores, libraries, music rooms, baggage rooms, automobile fleets, libraries, swimming pools, clothing stores, banks, florists, gift shops, screening rooms, medical services, convention halls, newsstands, mail services, roof gardens, and ballrooms—to name only the respectable services that hotels provided.” Like the self-contained superblock, he continues, “the privatized space of the metropolitan hotel could be said

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<sup>35</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 211, 212. The literary and imaginative convention of the “middle landscape,” according to Leo Marx’s foundational American Studies text, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), is a uniquely American construction—a product of “national” experience: a technologically advanced society inhabiting a (largely unpopulated) continent rich in natural beauty and resources.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 181 (emphasis mine).

to have turned its back on the city. And yet at the same time, the hotel recuperated urban life on terms that extended its *own* ability to manufacture desire.”<sup>37</sup>

Susan Buck-Morss goes further in suggesting that *all* public architecture of the nineteenth century “provides housing for the dreaming collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax-figure cabinets, casinos, railroad stations—as well as museums, apartment interiors, department stores, and public spas.”<sup>38</sup> To be sure, each of these spectacular architectural and/or entertainment sites appear in Millhauser’s text, and he attempts to bring them all together under one roof in his final hotel project, the elaborate Grand Cosmopolitan.<sup>39</sup> The Grand Cosmo is to be a “modern living facility” with all the amenities one could ever need under a single roof, thus eliminating the need to ever venture outside the enclosed dwelling walls. The eclectic interior is all simulacra, containing department stores, recreation facilities, theatres, and enclosed nature replicas of zoos and parks complete with exotic wildlife and stunning waterfalls that appear to cascade from the sky.

Each of these sites also falls into the spatial analytic category of “heterotopias,” as outlined by Foucault in his 1967 lecture, *Des Espace Autres*, or, “Of Other Spaces.” Here, Foucault distinguishes heterotopias from everyday spaces on account of their unique ability to juxtapose in one *real* place (real, here, as opposed to a *utopia*—an imaginary space) several different spaces that are otherwise incompatible, either temporally or geographically. His examples of such spaces are legion: the garden; the cemetery; the museum; the prison; the hospital; the cinema; the library; the

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<sup>37</sup> Marc Katz, “The Hotel Kracauer,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1999): 137.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> In Millhauser’s text, a review of this hotel space in *Architectural Record* notes that it “seemed to combine elements of the hotel, the museum, the department store, the amusement park, and the theater in a colossal enclosure that itself drew on so many styles as to make the worst excesses of late Victorian eclecticism seem a chaste instance of neoclassical restraint” (275).

brothel; the barracks; the carnival; the amusement park; the ship (among many more). Foucault contends that it is from within these spaces that individuals can most clearly perceive the social order. Many scholars and critics have been frustrated with Foucault's essay, citing its lack of clarity, his overly diffuse list of examples, or his refusal to offer an alternative to the problem he outlines. Nonetheless, I find that in reading *Martin Dressler* it is difficult not to imagine the space of the *hotel* as a heterotopia. Consider, for example, Dressler's first solo hotel establishment, the Hotel Dressler. Among its multiple attractions, visitors can find "a room containing a wigwam, a wax squaw gathering sticks, a young brave hacking a rock with a sharpened stone tool, and a seated chief smoking a long pipe," while in an adjacent hall labeled the Pageantry of Industry and Invention, hotel patrons could witness "working scale models of an Otis elevator, a steam crane lifting an I-beam, as well as full-scale models of a steam turbine, an internal combustion engine, and an electric generator with a drive pulley."<sup>40</sup> From this point on in the narrative, and leading up to his final project The Grand Cosmo, Dressler goes further and further in his attempt to consolidate myriad times and places into one readable and unified space.

With this in mind, Foucault's discussion of the impulse to *create* these sites, and his suggestion that it is a specifically modern phenomenon, finds striking parallels not only with Millhauser's fictional protagonist in the creation of his hotels, but also with Walter Benjamin himself in the project of "constructing" his own magnum opus, the *Arcades Project*. In capturing the spirit of both figures in the following passage, Foucault also historicizes their apparent desire not only to reconcile disparate histories and temporalities, but indeed to *possess* them: "The idea of accumulating everything," he writes, "of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 213.

is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, *this whole idea belongs to our modernity.*"<sup>41</sup>

With *The Grand Cosmopolitan*, Dressler surely goes too far in his attempt to reproduce and contain the world in miniature: On one floor a "densely wooded countryside," on another a New England village with a blacksmith or a Victorian resort with rattan chairs; on one level a Pleasure Park with artificial moonlight, mechanical birds, and a melancholy lagoon, on another a "Moorish Bazaar" or an opium den. Visitors might visit a revolving theater, a circus, the Museum of Waxworks Vivant, a "labyrinthine brothel," an interactive department store, the "Cinetheater" or the "Theatrum Mundi," which projected a montage of black and white images from "every corner of the known world."<sup>42</sup> The list of spaces and attractions within this single site is exhaustive and overwhelming. But, if these are all heterotopic sites, and indeed they are, how is Foucault's notion of heterotopia helpful here? In other words what do these sites *do*?

Foucault's thought is that in breaking radically with the mundane patterns of everyday existence, heterotopias can offer individuals insight into their own material condition. In other words, heterotopias are potentially redemptive in Foucault's formulation because of the ways in which they offer a space from which to contest power. Foucault's aim resonates with Benjamin's particular method of materialist historiography in the *Arcades Project*, wherein discarded objects are reinvested with the capacity to help us "awaken" from a "dream-filled sleep" that has been induced by industrial capitalism. Heterotopias uncannily "draw us out of ourselves" (or out of Benjamin's dream) because of the way, writes Foucault, they "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations

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<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 26.

<sup>42</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 272.

that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”<sup>43</sup> Again, Benjamin’s dialectical images function in the same way. In his reading of the Arcades and interiors as “residues of a dreamworld,” he suggests that the desire to transcend “history”—the capacity to enact a “historical awakening”—is indeed already embedded in the objects of material culture. As with the Arcades, then, *heterotopias* also work to make visible these desires while simultaneously showing us the impossibility of their fulfillment within the dominant order.

### *Uncanny Spaces and Animated Objects*

As indexed in this chapter’s introduction, the allusion to dreams in Millhauser’s title registers on several levels. While referring to the mythic “American dream” on one hand, this designation also refers to the literal dream state as well as to the frequent sense of unreality that befalls Millhauser’s protagonist throughout the narrative. The novel’s “dreamlike” quality is frequently evoked at moments in which the rapidly-expanding city is depicted not as a rational grid, but as a fertile *forest*—where one needs only to dig a hole in the ground “and from that hole a building grew—or a wondrous bridge,” where skyscrapers “throw down deep roots,” and “the avenues...erupt in strange, immense growths: modern flowers with veins of steel.”<sup>44</sup> Not only does such imagery obscure oppositions between wilderness and civilization, public and private, interior and exterior, reality and fantasy, but Millhauser’s narrative is also one in which objects themselves take on human qualities. With these spatial inversions as well the frequent animation of things, this narrative also activates several states with which Sigmund Freud described the sensation of the uncanny, or *unheimlich* (literally un-home-ly). In his well-known 1919 essay on this subject, Freud

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<sup>43</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

<sup>44</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 189, 75, 191, 229.

defines this experience as one that, in the process of reminding the subject of something that is “known of old and long-familiar,” simultaneously generates anxiety or fear. The uncanny invokes a defamiliarization of the familiar, or a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar, as in a dream or delirium. In the essay, Freud outlines a number of situations wherein individuals might be forced to confront this unsettling state. The uncanny, he writes, is “often and easily produced by *effacing the distinction between imagination and reality*.” Such a sensation may emerge, he explains, at a moment in which the subject is unsure “whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a *lifeless object might not be in fact animate*.”<sup>45</sup> With this in mind, consider the imaginative flight that takes place as Martin Dressler, while seated in the lobby of the Vanderlyn Hotel, begins to envision a plan for building the new Dressler Hotel:

And at once he saw: deep under the earth, in darkness impenetrable, an immense dynamo was humming. Above the dynamo was an underground hive of shops, with electric lights and heat, and above the shops an underground park or garden with what seemed to be a theater of some kind. Above the ground a great lobby stretched away: elevator doors opened and closed, people strode in and out, bells rang, the squeak of valises mingled with the rattle of many keys and the ringing of many telephones, alcove opened into alcove as far as the eye could see. Above the lobby rose two floors of public rooms and then the private rooms began, floor after floor of rooms, higher and higher, a vertical city, a white tower, a steel flower—and always elevators rising and falling, from the cloud-piercing top to the darkness where the great dynamo hummed. Martin had less the sense of observing the building than of inhabiting it at every point: he rose and fell in the many elevators, he strolled through the parlor of an upper room and walked in the underground park or garden—and then it was as if the structure were his own body, his head piercing the clouds, his feet buried deep in the earth, and in his blood the plunge and rise of elevators.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), 219-252 (my emphases).

<sup>46</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 174.

In the animation of otherwise inanimate or lifeless objects in this passage—where “doors opened and closed” without provocation, keys rattle and bells ring with seemingly no human agent—the sensation of the uncanny emerges again from within the narrative. The “humming dynamos” and electrical plants that are rooted “deep within the earth” in Dressler’s vision are the very forces that give life to each of his ventures. For Dressler, the dynamo is the “heart and soul” or the “backbone” of the modern hotel, to further emphasize the anthropomorphic language commonly ascribed to architectural *structures*, and as he “inhabits the building(s) at every point,” the dynamo also becomes an organ in what appears to be the electrification of his own body.

In the above passage depicting Martin Dressler’s fanciful daydream of a future hotel that will bear his name, not only do objects transform into active subjects, but even the hotel itself becomes human, or conversely, Dressler *becomes* the hotel. This strange embodiment resurfaces later in the narrative, when Dressler examines the progress of his second hotel, The New Dressler: “As the first columns rose over the top of the excavation,” Millhauser writes, “Martin had the sudden sharp sense of the bones of his shoulders pressing upward against his skin.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there are multiple instances in the text depicting uncanny transmutations between the Dressler himself and objects, material forms, or machines.

Early in the novel, for example, from his childhood bed above his father’s cigar store, Martin entertains another such vision of *becoming* an engine of power. Here, lying half-asleep in his old bedroom, images of the city, of monuments and machines, race through his imagination: He dreams of “Iron El trestles winding and stretching across the city, of department store windows and hotel lobbies, of electric elevators and streetcar ads, of the city pressing its way north on both

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<sup>47</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 234.

sides of the great park, of dynamos and electric lights, of ten-story hotels, of the old iron tower near the depot at west Brighton with its two steam-driven elevators rising and falling in the sky.”

And in his blood he felt a surge of restlessness, as if he were a steam train spewing fiery coalsmoke into the black night sky as he roared along a trembling el track, high above the dark storefronts, the gaslit saloons, the red-lit doorways, the cheap beer dives, the dance halls, the gambling joints, the sudden cry in the night.<sup>48</sup>

These visions of the city are exhilarating, even sexual, in this passage. However, the speed and force with which the images flash before Dressler, unrelenting and unprocessed, quickly turn his excitement into panic. The “sudden cry in the night” that punctuates this dream wakens him, startled, from what had suddenly become a *nightmare*.

Throughout the novel, Dressler nonetheless becomes keenly aware of how the terrifying force of industrial machinery—like the roaring steam train that haunted this dream—was being effectively disguised in various objects and sites throughout the city. This insight is also at the very heart of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*: “Within the nineteenth century urban phantasmagoria,” Benjamin notes, “There is an attempt to master the new experiences of the city in the frame of the old ones of traditional nature.”<sup>49</sup> In Millhauser’s novel, his protagonist is struck by this same principle, for example, when he accompanies the novel’s central female characters, the three Vernon women, on their first El ride. Though the train system itself is a “masterpiece of modern engineering,” as Dressler notes (the railroad itself is perhaps the primary technological icon of the nineteenth century), once individuals stepped inside the cars, Dressler observes, “[they] saw old-world mahogany paneling on the walls” which were “painted with plants and flowers.” There were “tapestry curtains on the windows, and Axminster carpets on the floors.” Further, upon entering

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<sup>48</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 447, quoted in Buck Morss *Dialectics*, 110.



the train station, with its “peaked gables and gingerbread trim,” travelers are transported to a different time and place; it was like entering “a country cottage,” Dressler admits.<sup>50</sup>

In such reflections, Dressler recognizes the heterotopic nature of various sites within the modern city. The train station in this example, and the Victorian furnishing of the El carriages, seem to counter a certain sense of disorientation and nostalgia that emerges in the face of rapid industrialization and change, as witnessed in the written reflections of Henry Adams and Henry James.<sup>51</sup> Specifically, Martin Dressler begins to recognize that capitalizing on the public’s desire to “move in both directions at once” could be enormously profitable. Epitomized by his revelation of “the sheer genius of the electric chandelier,” Dressler’s aim, within his hotels, is to “introduce every mechanical improvement without fail, and at the same time to emphasize the past, especially in décor.”<sup>52</sup>

The industrial city is Dressler’s greatest inspiration, but as it continues to multiply and develop, seemingly overnight and by some unknown force, the same city is also beginning to overwhelm and alienate Millhauser’s young hero. And just as these emblems of the modern city—“department store windows,” “electric elevators and streetcar ads,” “ten-story hotels”—are beginning to exceed Martin’s ability to conceive of them as a unified system, it is only in

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<sup>50</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Though Millhauser fictionalizes this example, other writers of the time have also figured the locomotive as a profound symbol of the contradictions of modern American culture, noting in particular the vast disparity between the train—a modern, masculine machine—and the interiors of its cars and stations—“homey,” feminine, or luxurious replicas of interior private space. In *The American Scene*, for example, Henry James compares the train to the destructive force of the colonizer, decrying the “pretended message of civilization” proffered in the interior of its cars (341). Tom Gunning explains: The railway compartment, with its attempt to provide all the comforts of home while traveling, in effect constitutes another of the contradictory spatial figures of modernity, an unmoored *interior*, rolling through space at great speed. Everything in the design of the railway compartment strives to make the traveler forget that he is not at home” (“The Exterior as Interieur: Benjamin’s Optical Detective,” *boundary 2*, Vol. 30 No. 1 (2003): 126.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 70-71.

imaginatively *becoming* these powerful forms that he can find his own place among them.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the rest of his building and entrepreneurial career, what fuels Dressler's need to build these immense structures are powerful ideas of spatial domination and masculine desire: In the above vision from his childhood bedroom, he *becomes* "a steam train spewing fiery coalsmoke into the black night sky"; In the Vanderlyn lobby, as he begins to lay out plans for The Dressler, he *becomes* a skyscraper hotel, "his head piercing the clouds, his feet buried deep in the earth, and in his blood the plunge and rise of elevators." Indeed, as David Nye proposes in his discussion of what he calls the American technological sublime: "One is both the all-seeing observer in a high tower and the ant-like pedestrian inching along the pavement below. One can either be outside, terrified by the speed and noise of the railway, or riding triumphantly over the landscape."<sup>54</sup> In both of these moments, in becoming the hotel and the skyscraper, Martin Dressler emphatically chooses the latter. With his buildings, then, Dressler wants to conquer nature; within their interiors, on the other hand, he attempts to refine and civilize it.

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<sup>53</sup> Keeping in mind the bodily forces at work in Dressler's dreams, both sleeping and waking, consider Walter Benjamin's meditation on the dreamworld of the nineteenth century in *The Arcades Project*: Here, "the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep. But just as the sleeper sets out on the journey through his body ... blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, muscle sensations become perceptible for [the dreamer] ... This sharpened receptivity is a feature of the dreaming collective, which settles into the arcades as into the insides of its own body. We must follow in its wake in order to expound the nineteenth century—in fashion and advertising, in buildings and politics—as the outcome of its dream visions" (*Arcades*, 389).

<sup>54</sup> David Nye, "The Consumer's Sublime," in *The New Media Theory Reader*, ed. Robert Hassan and Julian Thomas (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 30.

**Part Two:**  
**Leaving the Light On: Home, Nostalgia, and the Dreamworlds of Advertising**

The lamp is the spirit that watches over his room, over every room. It is the center of a dwelling, of every dwelling. One can no more conceive of a house without a lamp than a lamp without a house.

-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

From time to time – and this is probably true of all people – there is a sentence that comes into my head... “It's time for me to go back home now.” For me, it does not mean anything. But it is there all the same. Home is, I suppose just a child's idea. A house at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe.

-V.S. Naipaul, interview in the Observer

In Gaston Bachelard's discussion of the intense poetic resonance of the house in *The Poetics of Space*, images of the house are frequently animated in tandem with the image of the “distant light” of a lamp in its window. The lamp, he writes in the epigraph for this chapter, “is the center of a dwelling, of every dwelling. One can no more conceive of a house without a lamp than a lamp without a house.” Indeed, the author contends, “a rather large dossier of literary documentation on the poetry of houses could be studied from the single angle of the lamp that glows in its window.”

This image would have to be placed under one of the greatest of all theorems of the imagination of the world of light: *Tout ce qui brille voit* (All that glows sees). The lamp keeps vigil, therefore it is vigilant. And the narrower the ray of light, the more penetrating its vigilance...The lamp in the window is the house's eye and, in the kingdom of the imagination, it is never lighted out-of-doors, but is enclosed light, which can only filter to the outside.<sup>55</sup>

Personified in this passage, functioning as the “house's eye,” the lamp is an object that both enables and embodies vision. In many ways, then, the lamp is itself a “primal image”—something

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<sup>55</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 33, 34.

that incites poetic reverie; something that allows us to believe that “by living in such images...we could start a new life, a life that would be our own, that would belong to us in our very depths.”<sup>56</sup> This object’s connection to ideas of home, to a childlike sense of security and comfort, is further established in V.S. Naipaul’s declaration (in the above epigraph) that *home*, despite the term’s lack of an actual physical referent for the exiled subject, remains as a primal and indissoluble image. A “child’s idea,” he admits, “a house at night, and a lamp in the house. A place to feel safe.” There is an implicit nostalgia in these lamp-lit images of home-place. It is a strange nostalgia, though, indexing a desire for both transformation *and* return.

In Bachelard’s nostalgic treatise, *La Flamme d’une Chandelle*, highlighted above, the author laments the loss of poetic reverie that resulted when candlelight (“humanized light”) was replaced by incandescent light (“administered light”). This contrast between the two technologies is also a key tension in *Martin Dressler*, and the author is deliberate in specifying how each space in the text is illuminated. Whereas electric lighting is associated with urban and public spaces, with technology and progress, with the future, gaslight, on the other hand, is associated most strongly with women, sex, private interior rooms, and sites of childhood memory.<sup>57</sup> Dressler recalls, for

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<sup>56</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to consider as well that Walter Benjamin, in an essay in *Selected Writings* entitled “The Lamp,” also grounds his writing of childhood memories in the figure of the lamp.

Here the lamp is fixed in position. Yet it was portable. And unlike our lighting systems, with their cables, cords, and electrical contacts, you could carry it through the entire apartment, accompanied always by the clatter of the tube in its casing and the glass globe on its metal ring—a clinking that is part of the dark music of the surf which slumbers in the laborious toil of the century. When I bring the lamp close to my ear, I do not hear the noise of field artillery, or the sounds of Offenbach’s gala music, or factory sirens.

(...)Now the nineteenth century is empty. It lies there like a large, dead, cold seashell. I pick it up and hold it up to my ear. What do I hear? I do not hear the noise of field artillery or of Offenbach’s gala music; nor do I hear the howling of factory sirens or the cry that goes up at midday on the stock exchange—not even the din of soldiers on parade or the long drawn-out whistle of a train. I can of course imagine all these things. But what I hear when I put the shell up to my ear is something else: it is the rattling noise of the anthracite that is

example, the way the cigar store of his youth, his childhood home, was lit “even in summer by gaslights on the walls.”<sup>58</sup> Even his seedy experiences in a “gaslit” brothel, despite its obvious association with capital exchange, is described in terms of comfort and stability, and, in its familiarity, this site still somehow “bears the essence of the notion of home” in Bachelard’s terms.

### *The Parlor and the Lamp: The New Past and the Exotic Present*

While this chapter has thus far suggested that the insatiable architectural drive of Millhauser’s protagonist, along with his fascination with the “new,” are in many ways symptomatic of turn-of-the-century discourses of manhood, it is important to recognize as well how the impulses underlying Dressler’s pursuits are not immune to, indeed they are in many ways *informed by*, the same nostalgia that he disparages throughout the text. At the grand opening of the builder’s third lunchroom, for example, the young entrepreneur experiences a familiar and vague dissatisfaction, a moment of misfired desire that recalls his disappointment with the flimsy cigar tree in the window of his father’s store. Sitting inside the café, peering beyond its blue and yellow awning, and past the throngs of customers and curious onlookers outside the large plate glass window, he feels “a little sharp burst of restlessness, of dissatisfaction, as if he were supposed to be doing something else, something grander, higher, more difficult, more dangerous, more daring.” On this immediate drive for change, for something indefinitely more and *other*, Dressler has “The sense that a different future awaited him, a future that, once he saw it rising in the distance, would be as deeply

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emptied from the coal scuttle into the furnace; it is the dull pop with which the flame lights up the gas mantle; it is the jangling of my mother’s keys in her basket, the clatter of the tube in its casing, the clink of the glass globe on its metal ring when the lamp is carried from one room to another (692-3).

In this passage, the lamp is not only a physical or material object, but it is indeed the subject of, and catalyst for, sensual experience and memory.

<sup>58</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 4.

familiar to him as his own childhood, remained strong in Martin even as the success of the new café became a certainty.” In this fantasy, Martin locates the realization of this dream in an architectural material structure, one that he sees “rising in the distance.”<sup>59</sup>

But at the same time that this ideal future for which Dressler longs is projected onto a phallic architectural (exterior) structure, it is also cast in the language of what could be described as a “coming home.” In this vision, which is simultaneously nostalgic and forward-looking, the future will be both “new” and “deeply familiar.” Recalling Bachelard’s imagery of the maternal house—with its “warm bosom” that “cradles” its occupant—the future/structure Dressler imagines will enclose him in the security that he knew only, as he recalls, in “childhood.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, this is the singular moment throughout the novel in which the idea of the *familiar* does not subtly annoy Dressler, even as he is comforted by it. In each of its other uses, the modifier “familiar” appears only in reference to the world of the past, a world he is eager to transcend, a world of old-fashioned parlors and lounging women, of lavish Victorian furniture and excessive ornamentation.

Upon returning to the parlor of the Bellingham Hotel day after day, Dressler is disturbed that “Nothing had changed, nothing would ever change, throughout eternity he would step from the lobby into the lamplit parlor where three women sat waiting...”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, while the world outside grows daily at an overwhelming pace, the Bellingham parlor is a mainstay in Millhauser’s novel, remaining unchanged throughout the entire novel. Although Martin Dressler is often immediately irritated by the sight of the parlor room at the Bellingham Hotel, as soon as he “sank into the *familiar* chair,” Millhauser writes, “he felt deeply soothed, it was as if all his muscles ached and now, in the soft chair in the light of the *familiar* lamp among the well-known voices, he were

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<sup>59</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 129, 130.

<sup>60</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 164.

being stroked by gentle hands.”<sup>62</sup> The objects of the interior, here the lamp and the chair, attain human, feminine qualities. The familiar dark-red armchair remembers his form, and it seems to wait for and caress him.

That this parlor is repeatedly, almost obsessively, described as being “lamplit” is a crucial detail, for even though incandescent lamps had already almost everywhere replaced the older gas-fueled variety, in private interiors and intimate spaces, such as the home, gas lamps were often the preferred form of lighting. Just as exterior architectural structures are associated with masculinity and progress, interior spaces in Millhauser’s text, as well as the objects and furniture that adorn them, are conversely gendered. In fact, women in this narrative are often depicted as simply another object within the bourgeois interior. The three Vernon women are a mainstay of the “gaslit parlor,” depicted amongst the objects and furnishings contained within it:<sup>63</sup> plush red armchairs; an “intimate” dark wooden table; a “dome-shaded porcelain lamp.” Women, here, almost indistinguishable from the furniture on which they sit in perpetual “waiting,” thus figure as vessels of memory. Like Henry Adam’s Virgin figure, they function only as symbols, as “symbolic bearers of the nation” and as timeless embodiments of a faded tradition.<sup>64</sup>

In the novel’s description of this eternal “lamp-lit” parlor of the Bellingham hotel, where

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<sup>62</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 152.

<sup>63</sup> In Beverly Gordon’s essay on the conflation of women and interiors, for example, she discusses an 1878 text, *Art in the House*, which insisted that a woman must be in harmony with her domestic surroundings, indeed she should be “the noblest ornament of her ornamented dwelling.” Over forty years later, the same prescriptions are found in Emily Burbank’s advice book *Woman as Decoration* (1920). “Woman was herself an important factor in the decorating scheme of any setting,” she writes. The woman is deemed so essential to decoration of a room that she was inseparable from its actual furnishings. See “Woman’s Domestic Body: The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age,” *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 31, No. 4 (Winter 1996): 281-301.

<sup>64</sup> Of women’s symbolic role in defining nationalisms, Anne McClintock writes: “All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit,” (“Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism, and the Family,” *Feminist Review* 44, 1993), 62.

“the Vernon women sat night after night,” it is the object of the lamp that acquires the most frequent and meticulous detail:

At a smile from Mrs. Vernon or a wave from Emmeline [Dressler] would enter the parlor and sink into a waiting armchair, before the dark gleaming table with its glowing dome-shaded lamp, an ivory colored lamp with little Nile-Green sailboats and a Nile-green island on the translucent porcelain shade and, on the porcelain body, little Nile-green houses on a Nile-green hillside—an admirable lamp, a really first rate lamp that, he assured the women, with its removable oil fount and its excellent center-draft burner, was as hopelessly antiquated in the new world of incandescent lighting as the stage coach in a world of steam trains. Had they noticed, incidentally, that all the overhead lights in the lobby and dining room were all electric, even the chandeliers? For it was interesting, it was a subject that never ceased to fascinate him, how the two worlds existed together, the world of oil lamps and incandescent lights, of horse cars and steam trains, one world gradually crowding out the other.<sup>65</sup>

The “sheer genius of the electric chandelier,” as Dressler suggests, derives from its ability to provide the convenience and brilliance of electric light while erasing the traces of any a disconnection with the past. Similarly, at the same time that Dressler knows that the Bellingham’s ornate gas lamps are “hopelessly antiquated,” he trades on the object’s capacity to evoke in his hotel patrons a sense of stability, of some kind of shared past.

While it was in the grand American hotels of the mid-to-late nineteenth century that pioneering technological innovations such as elevators, steam heating, modern plumbing, telephones, and various electrical appliances and lighting gadgets were first presented to the public and used for commercial purposes, the electrification of private domestic homes, however, did not begin in earnest until 1918.<sup>66</sup> In *Electrifying America* (1992) David Nye explains that in attempting

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<sup>65</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 79.

<sup>66</sup> Udo J. Hebel, "Performing the Spectacle of Technology at the Beginning of the American Century," in *The Holodeck in the Garden: Science and Technology in Contemporary American Fiction* ed. Peter Freese and Charles Harris (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2004), 192-211.



to minimize the anxieties that emerged as electrical technology was incorporated into the everyday fabric of American social life, advertisers promoted their products in a way that *de*-emphasized their newness, presenting them instead to be familiar, and often “visually identical with the non-electric competition” (See figures below). Light bulb advertisements, he explains, “placed [the objects] in traditional settings such as Persian throne rooms and Chinese villages, suggesting that there was no disjunction between the premodern world that antimodernists longed for and new technology.”<sup>67</sup> In *Fables of Abundance* (1994), cultural historian Jackson Lears also explains that the more industrial the United States became, the more images of the East functioned for the consumer as a fantasy of a return to a preindustrial life. “As the new world became more settled and less available as a focus for fantasy,” suggests Lears, “Orientalist exoticism may have provided an alternative way to express longings for renewal through a return to origins.” Indeed, the use of such images was at the same time being used in advertising images for electric lighting—a trend that catered to a public nostalgia that was developing in the face of rapid industrial change by encouraging consumers to imagine an unbroken connection with a mythic past.<sup>68</sup>

The influential fine and commercial artist Maxfield Parrish, whose career incidentally began with his commission to illustrate L. Frank Baum’s first children’s book, *Mother Goose in Prose* (1897), is well known for his advertising partnership with General Electric, for whom he created opulent annual calendars promoting the Edison-Mazda brand of incandescent light bulbs from 1918 until 1934.<sup>69</sup> Crucially, in these lavish illustrations artificial light does not figure at all, except

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<sup>67</sup> David Nye, *Electrification*, 145, 156.

<sup>68</sup> Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 51, 104.

<sup>69</sup> Leigh George (2003) has written an excellent article that considers the concomitant changes in the lighting industry and US advertising in the early part of the century. He focuses especially on General Electric’s corporate consolidation of the American lighting industry and the ways in which GE dominated

for a single disembodied bulb burns brightly within the corporation's logo. Rather, Parrish depicts only natural, ethereal sunlight, choosing instead to explore what he called the "mythic history of light."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, General Electric's brand name for their incandescent bulbs, *Mazda*, has nothing to do with electric technology at all; it is instead a reference to *Ahura Mazda*, the Persian God of Light.



Fig. 3.2: *Egypt*, Maxfield Parrish, 1922 (Color Litho)  
© American Illustrators Gallery, NYC

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the lamp industry. See "The Sun's Only Rival: General Electric's Mazda Trademark and the Marketing of Electric Light," in *Design Issues*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 2003): 62-71.

<sup>70</sup> See William Leach, *Land of Desire*, 54.



Figure 3.3: *Lamp Seller of Baghdad*, Maxfield Parrish, 1923  
© American Illustrators Gallery, NYC

Parrish's art was widely popular in American households. Publishers claimed that by 1925 one in every four households had an edition of his popular "Daybreak" on display. In his later calendar designs for General Electric, such as "Egypt" (Figure 3.1) and "The Lamp Seller of Baghdad," (Figure 3.2) Parrish juxtaposes the old and the new and draws upon Orientalist imagery and Islamic motifs in order to sell the Mazda bulbs and convince consumers of its magical and timeless power. "Egypt: The Light of Egyptian Nights" depicts in the image's foreground a bare breasted Egyptian woman, her head and upper legs swathed in deep blue fabric, and her wrist is adorned with gold bangles as she plays a harp. In the background, behind two large potted shrubs, another dark-haired woman is seated beneath a row of candle-lit sconces as she gazes towards the horizon, which is framed between two pillar columns. A small child sits between the two women, gazing downward into a narrow reflecting pool. Bathed in the richest natural light, the young girl seems to be sitting directly in the light of the moon. In the "The Lamp Seller of Baghdad," a bearded street merchant sits barefoot and cross-legged on a woolen mat as an elegant woman stands above him investigating a lamp. The two figures are framed in a brick and stone archway, and behind them is a bustling market, illuminated by the bright desert sun. Atop both illustrations is the Edison Mazda trademark with a single incandescent bulb in the center of the frame—the disembodied bulb shines on its own, it is neither attached to another object nor is it connected to any source of electric power. Suggesting leisure, ancient traditions, and exotic extravagance while also eliding any reference to processes involved in the industrial production of electric light, these images enable a technology that is otherwise perceived to be dangerous, threatening, and alienating, to appear natural and inviting.

“Corresponding to the form of the new means of production,” writes Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*,” which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old, are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are *wish images*; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order of production.”<sup>71</sup> Martin Dressler’s “electric chandelier,” with its “combination of Mr. Edison and the courts of Europe,” is surely, then, a wish image—an expression of collective, if unconscious, desire. Paradoxically, though, despite Dressler’s attempts interior attempts to conceal the dynamo, to mask technology under a veneer of older forms, as each of his hotels become successively more modern, it is this very newness that becomes central to their marketing strategy. Indeed, lured by the genius promotion campaigns of Dressler’s new advertising executive, Harwinton, it was the promise of spectacular modernity that initially enticed people and drew them into the hotels.

If Dressler’s former manager Westerhoven, as detailed above, represents the *past*—a man that would rather fold his business altogether than watch his Vanderlyn Hotel “rush into the new century”—then the advertising executive Harwinton, charged with the task of “piquing the public interest” and “creating expectation” for The New Dressler and The Grand Cosmo hotel, is surely the *future* in Millhauser’s narrative. In contrast to Westerhoven’s office, with its “accumulation of knick-knacks,” and its “glints of *lamplit* dark wood,” the office of the young Harwinton “seemed to contain nothing” other than a large mahogany desk and a plush armchair for visitors. Harwinton’s own chair is “high-backed, straight, and wooden,” and his walls are bare. Where Westerhoven’s ornamented office is associated with the past and conflated with the female body (and with gas lighting), the purely functional office of the advertiser Harwinton is associated with progress, the

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<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 4.

future, and it is conflated with the male body—indeed “the room made Martin think of a smooth-shaven face,” and it called to his mind “a young monk or priest.”<sup>72</sup> Along with his later revelation that Harwinton reminds him “of something very up-to-date and efficient...like a typewriter or an electric circuit,” Martin Dressler links the advertiser’s body itself with both religious piety *and* the power of electrification.

“Electricity is God,” Henry Adams wrote of the new century. And just as Adams approaches the “occult mechanism” within the Dynamo as in a religious revelation, “much as the early Christians felt the Cross,” Millhauser’s hero too considers whether Harwinton, this *human dynamo*, with his remarkable skill at summoning devotion and desire, may in fact be a messianic figure.<sup>73</sup> “As an advertising man,” Dressler reflects, “[Harwinton] saw the world as a great blankness, a collection of meaningless signs into which he breathed meaning. Then you might say that Harwinton was God.”<sup>74</sup> The language of electricity is used here to index both a sacred power and the endless possibilities of the new future, but, as Henry Adams feared, it is a devotion that is bereft of spirituality, devoid of meaning. In Martin Dressler, it is through the figure of Harwinton that the potent metaphor of electricity—as a physical, corporeal, and social force of modernity—is transplanted onto the power and poetics of advertising.

While Harwinton’s genius advertising campaigns—emphasizing the spectacular and innovative *newness* of Dressler’s hotels—worked to entice the public into these spaces, once people were inside, writes Millhauser, they *stayed*, finding themselves “soothed by glints of *lamplight* on rich brown wood, excited by the *promise of something they could not name*” (my emphasis).<sup>75</sup> In

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<sup>72</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 207.

<sup>73</sup> Henry Adams, *Education*, 381.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 263.

<sup>75</sup> Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler*, 195.

thinking, then, of this “promise” of some “unnamable” thing, I would like to return to the dilemma Bachelard poses in *The Flame of a Candle*, whereby a single word, “lamp,” evokes two incompatible ideas: For Bachelard, the word “lamp,” when connected to the *electric* lamp contains not only a lack of “phenomenological depth,” but it also contains a *false promise*—“a promise to offer access to the realm of poetic reverie on which it could not possibly deliver.” The signifier “lamp,” here, thus “[seems] to have cut dangerously adrift from everything it had once signified and symbolized.”<sup>76</sup> Expanding this analysis of the lamp in relation to what Benjamin calls the “dreamworld of advertising,” in this chapter’s concluding section I would like to consider how the particular evocation of “home” in a contemporary advertising campaign echoes this Bachelardian dilemma wherein the kinds of “promises” encased in the word “home” are fundamentally undeliverable.<sup>77</sup> In particular, I will engage these ideas alongside a 2003 television advertisement for the world’s largest furniture retailer, Ikea. The commercial, directed by Spike Jonze, is entitled “The Lamp.”<sup>78</sup> I will focus on the ways in which representations of the lamp signal a particular construction of nostalgia and home, while similarly animating a dialectic of desire and deferment that is at the heart of the logic of advertising.

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<sup>76</sup> Jeremy F. Lane, "Towards a Poetics of Consumerism," *French Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2006): 25.

<sup>77</sup> I am borrowing here from Jeremy Lane’s discussion of “les pavilions” (French suburbs) in which, using the theories of Henri Lefebvre, he writes: “Yet what it in fact delivered was not those values themselves but a series of standardized, mass-produced objects, which merely signified those values. In the ‘suburban house,’ the authentic values that Bachelard described in his studies of domestic space could be experienced, but only at one remove, as it were. Domesticity, even authenticity itself, had become commodified, marketed and sold as signifiers of themselves, rather than lived or experienced as the things in themselves.”



A man comes to me with a cake of scouring soap. He wants me to sell it for him. I see a white lump. It's my job to make this white lump, which has no meaning, except in the most limited and practical sense, *the most important thing in the world*. I create a meaning for it. I create desire. To have this soap is to have what Aristotle says all men desire: *happiness*.

-Harwinton, in *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*



Fig. 3.4: Ikea advertising campaign beginning in 2007

**Happiness**

Close the door and leave the outside world behind you. Update the children play. The sideboard in the hall is decorated with treasured photographs of family and friends alike. You grin as you pass the picture of you and your best friend in cowboy hats... what a night! In the living room the fire roars. Your favourite armchair is waiting. Kick off your shoes and sink into it. The kettle whistles the question: 'Tea? Yes please. Welcome home.'

You design your space to make you happy. It's an expression of how you feel. And the cats that share our homes count the same. They love for happiness and they are experts at finding it. Be it the chair that always catches the sun, the top of the bookcase with the great view of the bird-table or that special spot at the end of the bed that they like to kneed with their claws (with your feet underneath, of course), cats always find the places that make them happy.

Flip through the pages of this special edition catalogue to find out what happened when a whole gang of cats made themselves at home inside our store and discover just which of our home furnishing products made them happy.

To find out more about our new Ikea products get a copy of the UKA catalogue by visiting [www.ikea.co.uk](http://www.ikea.co.uk)

*Martin*  
Martin Nilsson Country Manager, IKEA UK

Everything for a better everyday life at home - from dorm room to royal castle.  
The Swedish Retail organisation

IKKA Svenska Företag AB

Living room 4  
Dining 8  
Kitchen 10  
Bedroom 12  
Eating 14  
Cooking 16  
Decoration & Textiles 19

1. HENNES 3 Drawer chest £89 Stained, solid pine. Designer: K. Hultberg / K. Hagberg. 116x51, H97cm, blue. 40, 80x51  
2. POÄNG armchair, £59 W69xD82, H103cm, birch veneer / Alne medium red. 59x 251,5x

BLÄMES Highchair with tray £45

HERMAN Chair Bed £11.99

Enough drawers and compartments to satisfy even the most curious cat

Well-mannered cats deserve a seat at the table

All catalogue prices are maximum prices  
valid until 24 July 2011

Fig. 3.5: Screenshot from 2011 UK Ikea catalogue



### ***Home: The Most Important Place in the World***

We buy love, joy, fulfillment, security, a sense of identity, the compensatory aura enveloping products and services. Advertising is the poetry of the modern world; and what it promises is freedom from fear.

-Philip Wander, in Henri Lefebvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World*

IKEA believes that home is an emotion, a feeling of security, comfort, and peace.

-Pernille Lopez, president of IKEA North America

In 2003, IKEA initiated a marketing campaign entitled “Unböring,” which urges consumers to abandon the attachment they have to old objects and furniture, to things of the *past*, in favor of newer replaceable objects that might be better reflections of their Selves. In fact, IKEA directly promises in this campaign’s press release that it is entirely “possible to create the life you really want at home with IKEA home furnishings.” The television advertisement, “The Lamp,” was part of this campaign, and it uses the image/object of the lamp to highlight a perceived feeling of transience in what some would call the “postmodern” American landscape. At the same time, though, this advertisement works in part to mock Americans’ assumed “attachment” to furniture and household objects by encouraging consumers to throw away and start over—to “Chuck the Chintz” as their contemporaneous British campaign decries.

The main character in the commercial is a red lamp. The entire spot is seen from this lamp’s visual and assumed “emotional” perspective, thus echoing Bachelard’s personification of the lamp as the “house’s [vigilant] eye.” As a nameless woman, whose face we can barely discern, walks outside, cradling the lamp like a small child, the viewer (assuming the point of view of the lamp) is given a brief glimpse of the interior space of the apartment for the last time. Further humiliated, after being tossed out and placed by the garbage in the pouring rain, the lamp, again

personified, is slumped over and seems to gaze up through the picture window at its old home, warm and inviting, and then at its newer, more “modern” replacement.

The lamp’s previous dwelling had been on a small table between two windows, next to several framed photographs, a small figurine, and a vessel of some sort—each object is thus either a container and/or an article of memory. From this table, the lamp has a direct view of a busy and dark metropolitan street. The walls of the apartment, or at least the room/section shown, are almost entirely made up of windows. The window, in this case, a frequent literary symbol of borders and border markers, functions as a transparent boundary between inside and outside; between the domestic interior and the urban exterior—home and *not* home. The dramatic difference between the interior space in the commercial, painted in warm tones and minimally decorated, with the exterior—the daunting, dreary cityscape—is articulated visually and audibly. Theatrically staged alongside Jonze’s symphonic score, the instant the nameless woman opens her front door to face the outside, the wind becomes audible, disruptive, and the urban exterior, in a kind of reverse Wizard of Oz scene, is depicted almost entirely in black and white.

The four windows of the apartment, then, and presumably the television screen into which the at-home viewer or consumer is gazing highlight an ambiguity between interior and exterior, or public and private space. This idea of “watching,” eavesdropping even, is further emphasized by the figure of a blonde, lanky Swedish man in a rain-soaked parka who enters the frame at the end of the ad. Addressing the viewer directly, we are given the impression that he’s been lurking around in the dark city streets peering into windows and spaces of privacy (in this instance, the space of both the woman’s living room *and* into our own.) “Many of you feel bad for this lamp,”

the man says of the discarded domestic object slouching perilously in the rain at the end of the advertisement. “That is because you are crazy. It has no feelings and the new one is much better.”

The lamp, and the imaginative use of light in general, has long been deployed in visual and literary texts as a way to evoke a particular image of what life and home should look like, thus recalling Bachelard’s contention that the image of the light in the window is a primal one—something that gives individuals the impression that by living in such stable images “we could start a new life, a life that would be our own, that would belong to us in our very depths.”<sup>79</sup> This characterization curiously echoes the sentiments found in IKEA’S 2003 press release for the “Unboring” campaign, with its self-proclaimed objective to “to tap into the feelings and emotions that people have about their furniture.” Indeed the company’s public statement further suggests that Jonze’s commercial, with the lamp as its star, is “designed to show consumers that Ikea can help you discover and create the life at home you really want, and that you can do it in an exciting, new, and unböring ways.”<sup>80</sup>

In “The Lamp,” Ikea both promotes and prescribes frequent life-remodeling through the process of replacing domestic objects not because they wore out or broke, but simply because it is affordable and fashionable. Domestic objects, in this narrative, belong to the “cult of the transitory,” described by Henri Lefebvre as reflecting the essence of capitalist modernity, which engenders a “profoundly ambivalent attitude towards material goods: they [are] something to be longed for, acquired, then superseded and discarded.”<sup>81</sup> In a 2011 piece in *The New Yorker*, entitled “House Perfect,” Lauren Collins explains that where once the act of selecting a piece of furniture

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<sup>79</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 33.

<sup>80</sup> Official Ikea Press Release, <http://www.ikeafans.com/articles/ikea/ikea-marketing/336-unboring-official-ikea-press-release.html>

<sup>81</sup> Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 385.

was considered to be a “serious decision,” because of the expectation its permanence, “It is [now] said that Americans keep sofas longer than they keep cars, and change dining-room tables about as often as they trade spouses. IKEA has made interiors ephemeral. Its furniture is placeholder furniture, the prelude to an always-imminent upgrade. It works until it breaks, or until its owners break up. It carries no traces.”<sup>82</sup> The amusing tone of this article notwithstanding, it seems that while IKEA has become an engine of propagation for a particular construction of modernity, its products might also be viewed as cultural indicators of transience, as temporary placeholders for the real object of desire.<sup>83</sup>

This process of consumer deferment ties in well with IKEA founder Ingvar Kamrad’s bizarre manifesto, *The Testament of a Furniture Dealer* (1976), which states: “Happiness is not reaching your goal. Happiness is being on the way.”<sup>84</sup> It resonates as well with psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek’s claim that desire and *jouissance* are inherently antagonistic, exclusive even: desire’s function “is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire... The object is not what we desire, what we are after, but rather *that which sets our desire in motion*.”<sup>85</sup> In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or never has existed. [It] is a sentiment of loss and displacement but it is also a romance with one’s

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<sup>82</sup> Lauren Collins, “House Perfect: Is the IKEA Ethos Creepy or Comfy?,” *The New Yorker* (October 3, 2011), 55.

<sup>83</sup> Alison Clarke, “The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration,” in *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. Daniel Miller, (Oxford and New York: Berg Press, 2006): 97.

<sup>84</sup> From “The Gospel According to Ikea,” in *The Guardian*: “A Furniture Dealer’s Testament” is Ingvar Kamrad’s message to his co-workers. It was written in the mid-70s when the Ikea founder emigrated from Sweden to become a tax exile in Switzerland. Every co-worker should have one: it is the path to truth, the encapsulation of the sacred concept. Kamrad’s central ideas are further distilled in *The Little Word Book* (shades of Mao): humility, strength of will, simplicity, cost awareness, fellowship. The latter is described in Bertil Torekull’s authorized history of Ikea, *Leading By Design*, as “a kind of catechism; its explanations are in the spirit of Martin Luther’s teachings to the faithful. (...) As traditional institutions—the Crown, the Church, Parliament, Marks and Spencer—have withered in the UK, Ikea has stepped in to fill the gap. It is more than a store, it is a religion; it is not selling furniture, it is pitching you a dream.”

<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Desire: Drive = Truth: Knowledge,” *Umbr(a)*, 1997.

own fantasy.”<sup>86</sup> Her typology involves two types of nostalgia that characterize one’s relationship to home: Restorative nostalgia, stressing the *nostos*, the home, manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past; and reflective nostalgia, stressing the *algia*, the longing itself, tends to “linger on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.”<sup>87</sup> The reflective topos focuses more on the individual than on the imagined origins or community that haunt the restorative nostalgic, and like Žižek’s formulations of desire (for the lost Lacanian object), Boym’s reflective nostalgia functions as well to perpetually defer the homecoming itself. In “The Lamp,” IKEA appears to be mocking the idea of nostalgia, claiming that the sentimental attachment to objects on account of the memories contained within them is irrational. In disavowing the idea of object attachment, though, IKEA is simultaneously relying on a nostalgic attachment to the idea of a perfectible home, an image which itself is inextricably linked to memory and sentiments of the past.

*New York Times* Style reporter John Leland explains that while the emotional-aesthetic appeal of the (authentic or pre-fabricated) antique, on the one hand, lies in its promise of permanence and connection with the past—however fabricated this connection may be (here we might recall Dressler’s electric chandelier)—the appeal the “disposable” modern IKEA product lies in its implied “connection with motion itself.” Thus, in IKEA parlance, impermanence has become a sign of progress and not decay.<sup>88</sup> One reading of this advertisement, then, suggests that the disposability of IKEA products allows modern design and objects to become symbols of *individual* change, thereby enabling the home itself (private domestic space) to be the very site of that change. Inextricably bound with individual identity and the imagined lifestyle one wishes to perform and

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<sup>86</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 2.

<sup>87</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> John Leland. “How the Disposable Sofa Conquered America,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 1, 2002.

display there, the home, in this formulation, is in a perpetual state of *becoming*. This idea disrupts many of the gendered distinctions that have been mapped onto domestic space where the interior, coded as feminine and private, is considered a site of stasis and tradition, while exterior, “public” space—space *outside* of the home—is figured as a masculine site of progress, politics, and change; of Becoming rather than being, of transcendence rather than immanence.<sup>89</sup>

The potential cunning of Jonze’s advertisement, however, goes beyond this gendered inversion of space. If the lamp is in fact a “primal image,” already fixed firmly in our memory and associated with a particular nostalgic construction of home, then this choice of consumer object might have a far greater emotional impact on the at-home viewer than if it were, say, an affordable Klippan couch or stylish throw rug. This advertisement suggests that you *can* attain the romantic ideal of home, although the success of the corporation depends on the fact that you cannot. The lamp is not a symbol of deferred gratification in this commercial; rather, it is a symbol of immediate gratification. At the end of the advertisement, the trashed and demoralized lamp peers into the domestic interior to find the woman literally *caressing* her new lamp. If advertising is indeed the “poetry of the modern world,” as it is suggested in the introduction of Henri Lefebvre’s *Everyday Life*, it is only in the dream world of the commercial that the new lamp actually *is* what the woman wants, indeed *all* she wants. It is the actual consumer, at home and outside of the poetic space of the advertisement, whose desire is deferred. Thus, while the Unböring campaign might flaunt a progressive stance on modernity, object attachment, and even gender by

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<sup>89</sup> Further, in David Morley’s *Home Territories* (2000), Meaghan Morris explains: “There is a very powerful cultural link...dear to a masculinist tradition inscribing “home” as the site both of frustrating containment (home as dull) and of truth to be rediscovered (home as real). The stifling home is the place from which the voyage begins and to which, in the end, it returns...The tourist leaving and returning to the blank space of the domus is, and will remain, a sexually in-different “him” (65).

purportedly challenging the “cult of stability and permanence” that surrounds the home, Jonze’s commercial trades on this emotional attachment to things, even as it mocks it.

Lawrence Levine asserts that the central paradox of American history has been a belief in progress coupled with a fear of change; an urge towards the inevitable future with a longing for the irretrievable past; a deeply ingrained belief in America’s unfolding destiny and a haunting conviction that the nation was in a state of decline.<sup>90</sup> Put another way: If Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, created the memory of an Edenic America to accompany their narratives of progress, as Levine suggests, the embroiling of these two impulses thus established a belief that the future would never be as good as an imagined past. As we have seen, Ikea, on the other hand, is suggesting quite the reverse: that the past will never be as good as an imagined *future*. Still, the ideal of *home*, I argue, is projected in both of these moments onto either an irretrievable past, as a site to which we can never return, or onto a perpetually deferred future, as a site to which we can never truly arrive.

As Svetlana Boym notes, the danger of nostalgia, and perhaps its manipulative appeal, is that it “tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one.” I thus highlight this campaign in order to show the way it conflates the *aura* of home, its poetic resonance, with the modern *practice* of home, the built and endlessly perfectible dwelling space. In suggesting that the existential longing for home—as a dreamed-of site of security, memory, belonging—can be fulfilled by and through the perfection of the physical *space* of home, IKEA creates and stages contemporary consumer desire for a fundamentally undeliverable object.

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<sup>90</sup>Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 191.

## **Conclusion:**

Along with instigating a dramatic shift in the social and spatial organization of public and private life in turn-of-the-century U.S. cities, electrification also became a metaphor for thinking about enormous changes in American values, identities, and social life. In the face of such “chaos” and these “forces totally new,” as Henry Adams writes, ideas of home come to be a stabilizing force, and the home itself, to appropriate David Harvey’s words (and recalling Westerhoven/Benjamin’s collector) “becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression.”<sup>91</sup> In the construction of social space in each of the texts explored in this chapter, we find a narrative of home based on reproductions of nostalgia, where desire is linked to gendered ideas about particular objects. The lamp, in this reading, is both a “wish image” (Benjamin), wherein the old and new penetrate as the collective seeks to “overcome and transfigure...inadequacies in the social order,” and it is a “primal image” (Bachelard), with a poetic resonance that necessarily signals an image of home. The interiors of Dressler’s fictional hotels, as well as the advertising campaign highlighted above—each engaging the redolent power of this single domestic object—make an implicit and impossible promise to consumers, a promise of *home*.

As the ultimate object of desire, home, that “impossible Thing,” temporarily but falsely appears as something that can be materially acquired. It does “materially signify in some form,” [a lamp, perhaps, pictured beautifully in an Ikea catalog] offering up an air of familiarity and attainability to something that is, by its very nature, unattainable—but the gap between desire and

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<sup>91</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 292.



its satisfaction always returns.<sup>92</sup> While home may be “the most important place on earth,” as IKEA claims so boldly the cover of its catalogue, its very existence is predicated upon its unattainability. As this same idea is reflected in the ultimate failure of Martin Dressler’s architectural ventures to satisfy his unnamable yearnings, it would appear that the ideal of home *must remain in dream*, in the fictions of the past or the future, or in what Bachelard’s space of poetic reverie:

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home...Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> See Tom Cohen’s discussion of Zizek in “Beyond the Gaze: Zizek, Hitchcock, and the American Sublime” *American Literary History* 7 (1995): 358, 362. Cited also in Arthur Salzman “A Wilderness of Size,” *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 3 (2001): 598.

<sup>93</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 61.

Some millions of other people felt the same helplessness, but few of them were seeking education, and to them helplessness seemed natural and normal, for they had grown up in the habit of thinking a steam-engine or dynamo as natural as the sun, and expected to understand one as little as the other.

-Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*



Fig. 3.6: "His Only Rival." Poster advertising General Electric Mazda Light Bulb, Color Lithograph, Philadelphia, 1910.

He had seen the same idea at work in the El trains: miles of iron girders and columns, the whole thing a masterpiece of modern engineering, the cars equipped with up-to-date running gear—but step inside those cars and you saw old-world mahogany paneling on the walls, tapestry curtains on the windows, and Axminster carpets on the floors. He had been told that the old-fashioned curtains were hung on concealed spring rollers.

~Steven Millhauser, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*

Against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with its textiles.

~Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*



Fig. 3.7: "A Little Fabric Makes a Big Difference." Swedish Ikea Campaign (2006).

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. (...) For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their “Post No Bills” are its writing desk, newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the café terrace is the balcony from which it looks down on its household. (...) More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.

-Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*



Fig. 3.8: In December 2010, IKEA transformed twelve Parisian bus stops into small lounges.





Figure 3.9: “Good design can make the everyday a little better.” As part of a 2006 exhibit entitled “Everyday Fabulous,” IKEA furnished various public spaces throughout Manhattan. This tableau was staged at a playground on West 16<sup>th</sup> Street.



*His living room is a box  
in the theatre of the world.*  
-Walter Benjamin

Fig. 3.10: In anticipation of the grand opening of an Ikea store in Japan, the company installed fourteen of these outdoor showroom displays along the sides of a street in Aoyama. The cubes are called *Ikea 4.5 museums*, in reference to the size of four and a half tatami mats.

## CHAPTER 4

### From Screen to Shining Screen: The Wizard of Oz in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Mere mechanical progress is no longer an adequate or practical theme for a World's Fair. Instead we must demonstrate an American way of living. We must tell the story of the relationships between objects in their everyday use—how they may be used and when purposely used how they may help us.

-Michael Hare, Secretary of the Fair of the Future Committee, 1939

*The Wizard of Oz* fills such a large space in our imagination. It somehow seems real and important in a way most movies don't. Is that because we see it first when we're young? Or simply because it is a wonderful movie? Or because it sounds some buried universal note, some archetype or deeply felt myth?

-Roger Ebert, 1996

*The past is black and white.* Thus pronounces the narrator of “The World of Tomorrow,” a 1984 documentary film chronicling the 1939 New York World's Fair, which takes its title from the fair's promotional tagline. “The future,” the voice continues, “is color.” On cue with this phrase, the camera slowly pans out as the sleepy two-toned newsreel footage of Depression-era New York City is gradually supplanted by colorful panoramic views of the fair. Its two iconic architectural structures are at the center of these visions: the *Trylon*, a pristine white spire that reached 700 feet into the air, and the *Perisphere*, a 200-foot sphere that housed “Democracy,” an imagined replica of the metropolis of the future. Soon viewers of the documentary can see, in full color, the entire

temporary landscape that has taken over Flushing Meadows Park, the former dumping ground situated on the outskirts of the New York City borough of Queens.<sup>1</sup>

Opening in April of 1939, the New York World's Fair commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Washington's presidential inauguration. With an estimated 45 million in total attendance over its two consecutive summer seasons, the event took place in the aftermath of the most serious economic crisis the nation had ever witnessed. It would also emerge in the midst of intensifying international conflicts and rumors of United States involvement in World War II—rumors that would become a reality soon after the Fair officially closed its doors on October 27, 1940. Under the unifying slogan, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” the city of the future on display in Queens that summer worked hard to convince visitors of the redemptive power of science and technology at a moment in which the public's faith in “American” opportunity and abundance, or of *any* national “destiny” for that matter, was devastatingly low.

As with all World's Fairs, the ultimate goals of the New York World's Fair were to attract consumers, to stimulate the economy, and to turn a profit while simultaneously boosting national morale. One way the “World of Tomorrow” achieved this was in its detailed construction of an optimistic vision of the future of both the American city and the American home. Housed in streamlined Art Deco buildings, the technological marvels (Talking Robots! Fluorescent lights! Electric dishwashers!) and new consumer products (Nylons! Wonderbread! Air conditioners!) that were at the heart of the Fair seemed to promise that out of the grim darkness of the Depression, a new world—one that was both materially abundant and technologically equipped—was just around

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<sup>1</sup> Before its transformation for the New York World's Fair, the site was famously referred to as the “valley of ashes” in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald described the area as “a certain desolate area of land...a valley of ashes...a fantastic farm where ashes grew like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens.” F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995).

the corner. It was the “Dawn of a New Day,” as the Fair’s official song announced, and this new day would be brought to you by Westinghouse®, General Motors®, Frigidaire®, Eastman Kodak®, General Electric®, AT&T® and RCA®.

In their 1984 documentary about the Fair, directors Lance Bird and Tom Johnson abruptly switch to color film at the very moment the at-home viewer first enters this fantasyland of the New York World’s Fair. In doing so, they are deliberately echoing another cinematic moment that took place the same year. In 1939, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s lavish musical production of “The Wizard of Oz”—the most expensive cinematic production to date—transported Dorothy and her audience from two-toned dustbowl Kansas to the enchanted Land of Oz, made even more magical through the stunning effects of new Technicolor film-process technology. In essence, that prophetic August of 1939 witnessed the birth of *two* iconic dream cities, the Emerald City and the “Land of Tomorrow.”<sup>2</sup>

Bird and Johnson’s allusion to that *other* national spectacle of 1939, Oz’s cinematic debut, is not isolated here in the documentary’s introductory montage. Rather, in consciously forging this link between the fair’s “Land of Tomorrow” and L. Frank Baum’s (and later MGM’s) Emerald City, the Oz connection is sustained throughout the duration of the film. Narrator Jason Robards recollects during the film, for example, that the Fair was “[his] own Emerald City of wisdom and illusion at the end of a Yellow Brick Road.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In November 2010, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History debuted a small interactive exhibition entitled 1939, which focuses on both the NYWF and *The Wizard of Oz* in demonstrating how Americans relied on multiple forms of entertainment and spectacle in order to distract themselves from that turbulent year in the nation’s history. The exhibit, which closed in October 2012, displayed various artifacts from both the film and the Fair, such as portions of the Scarecrow costume from *The Wizard of Oz* (and for a limited time the coveted ruby slippers), along with various Fair memorabilia.

<sup>3</sup> A recent documentary entitled “The Origins of Oz,” which aired on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2011 on the Smithsonian Channel, draws a similar parallel between 1939 World’s Fair and *The Wizard of Oz*. Just as



It is interesting to consider that despite massive promotional efforts for each, the New York World's Fair *and* the initial release of MGM's "Wizard of Oz" were both massive financial failures. The Fair registered an official deficit of \$19 million, and the film registered a net loss of over one million dollars, the largest loss MGM had seen to date. Despite its award-winning soundtrack,<sup>4</sup> the film itself garnered a far less favorable reception. Critic Russell Maloney, writing for *The New Yorker* in 1939, called the film "a stinkeroo," with a plot that had "no trace of imagination, good taste, or ingenuity."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, an article in *The New Republic* admitted, "As for its light touch of fantasy, it weighs like a pound of fruitcake soaking wet."<sup>6</sup> *Time* likened it to "a Broadway spectacle," and thought the final bedside scene to be "as sentimental as *Little Women*."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, given the film's initially tepid reviews and general failure at the box office, I am especially interested here in the process by which it eventually became a defining "American" narrative and iconic cultural site. Today on "Rotten Tomatoes," for example, which is an online user-generated film review site that is notoriously harsh, *The Wizard of Oz* is awarded with a coveted 100% on the *Tomatometer* and it is deemed "an absolute masterpiece." During a CBS television special in 1998, the American Film Institute (AFI) released a list of the 100 Greatest Films of All Time in which *The Wizard of Oz* rang in at number six, placing it squarely within the ranks of films

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the fair's promoters hoped it would uplift the spirits of a nation bludgeoned by the Depression, the Hollywood movie industry, at the peak of its "Golden Age" in 1939, could also provide a diversion from the widespread hardships of the 1930s.

<sup>4</sup> After the film's original release in 1939, its musical score was immediately successful across the world. "Over the Rainbow" was voted the number one song of the twentieth century by The Recording Industry Association of America, and the tune was quickly embraced as a kind of national anthem and symbol. The song was also embraced by American troops overseas during the Second World War.

<sup>5</sup> Russell Maloney, "The Wizard of Hollywood," *The New Yorker* (August 19, 1939): 60.

<sup>6</sup> Otis Fergusson, "There Are Wizards and Wizards," *New Republic* (1939): 190-191.

<sup>7</sup> Review, "Cinema: The New Pictures," *Time* (August 21, 1939). For more reviews and public reactions to the film's original release, see Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz: Movie Magic and Studio Power in the Prime of Mgm-and the Miracle of Production* (New York: Hyperion, 1998).

such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). In the same poll, Oz was declared to be the number one family film of all time.

In closely considering this dramatic shift in the manner by which the film's aesthetic and moral value has been gauged, this chapter offers two interrelated explanations. The first is both spatial and rhetorical, and has to do with changes in the meaning and impact of "home" itself, which is unarguably a, if not *the*, central theme of the narrative. The second, both spatial and *material*, suggests that these shifts can be read by and through a single domestic object—the television—a commodity that made its public debut at the 1939 Fair, although it was not immediately adopted into the American home.

As with each chapter in this project, in order to frame this inquiry, part of my analysis will center on a single domestic object. This method offers a lens through which we can see how mapping the cultural life of Oz, in this case, also enables us to tell a story of the shifting cultural values and ideologies that get incorporated into the symbol and space of "home." Using this reading practice, I outline below my contention that it was in no small part the domestic television—both the object itself and the cultural practices surrounding it—that would eventually catapult *The Wizard of Oz* into its contemporary role as a timeless "classic," an event, and a collective ritual of civic performance.

This dissertation's second chapter investigated shifting discourses surrounding the idea of "home" in L. Frank Baum's original text *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, written in 1900 and considered to be the "first American fairytale." This chapter, on the other hand, looks closely at the enduring cultural life of Oz, focusing in particular on its most well known adaptation, MGM's 1939 filmic remake, which has since become, according to the Library of Congress, the most

watched film in world history.<sup>8</sup> I begin this analysis with New York's "World of Tomorrow" exhibition because, like Chapter Two's investigation of the Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, it too offers a fertile ground from which to explore how changing ideas of home are intimately enmeshed with discourses surrounding the domestic commodity at particular moments in American cultural history.

As highlighted in this chapter's epigraph, the aim of the New York World's Fair was to both highlight and prescribe an "American way of living." To do this, as Fair of the Future secretary Michael Hare announced, then embedded in the pedagogy and experience of the Fair must be "the story of the relationships between objects in their everyday use—how they may be used and when purposely used how they may help us." In its insistence that tomorrow's world would be vibrant, plentiful, and fully equipped with the latest in technological advancements, the 1939 fair also contained within it the yet unmapped future of both the text and the cultural life of *The Wizard of Oz*. Perhaps most presciently, as I will demonstrate, the seeds of this future could be found in the Radio Corporation of America's (RCA) exhibition building, where industry representatives would introduce consumer-grade domestic televisions for the first time to an eager American public.

While the first section of this chapter focuses primarily on textual adaptation, looking at several major distinctions between L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's tale and MGM's 1939 remake, the second section then analyzes the film as a televisual text, beginning with its national broadcast in 1956. I argue that considering the text's historical horizon of *reception* helps us to understand how and why this otherwise unremarkable text has garnered its iconic status as the ultimate symbol

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<sup>8</sup> Cementing this position, in 1989 the film was declared a "National Treasure" by the U.S. Library of Congress and the National Film Registry. This title is given to those articles of Americana that the institution considers to be as especially "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." *The Wizard of Oz* shares this title with items such as Thomas Jefferson's handwritten draft of the Declaration of Independence

of and tribute to the American home.<sup>9</sup> This analysis centralizes the most spectacular of domestic commodities—which made its debut at the New York World’s Fair and would forever alter the cultural history of Oz—the television. As an object, a practice, and a social force, this seemingly innocuous object placed in the corner of most living rooms by 1955, encapsulated a host of anxieties and ambivalences surrounding the family, gender, domestic leisure, the nature of public and private life, and technological progress. Beyond this, I argue that commercial television played a critical role in changing the discourse of the home itself and, by extension, the cultural messages embedded within the Oz narrative. Aside from the medium of its reception, (at least) two things changed as Oz travelled first through time and then through space, from the cinema to the living room. The experience of spectatorship changed as well as the cultural values associated with *home*, family, consumption, and nostalgia. How, then, did the way people watched influence *what* they watched?

Taking into account the huge surge in the film’s popularity after its nationally televised CBS premiere in 1956, and the subsequent annual holiday showing which commenced in 1959 (because, of course, as Perry Como reminds us, there really is *No Place Like Home for the Holidays*), the second part of this chapter will look not at the text itself, but rather at the shifting modes and spaces of its transmission—as the site of Oz’s reception moved from the public space of the theater

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<sup>9</sup> Though outside the scope of this project, the popularity and enduring character of Oz after its initial emergence as a *televisual* text has much to do with the contentious relationship of the television industry (intra-industry conflicts between FCC and networks about standards, commercialization, etc.) and film industries at this critical moment in broadcast history, as numerous media scholars have documented in detail. For a more detailed discussion of the history of television policy and industry, and for greater detail surrounding the intense broadcast debates that stalled television promotion and sales, see: William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); John R. Groch “Corporate Reading, Corporate Writing: MGM and CBS in the Land of Oz” (ProQuest UMI Dissertations Publishing, 1996); Robert Britt Horwitz, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

to the allegedly “private” site of the home. Respectively, in 1939 and 1956, both the cinema and the television were emerging consumer spectacles. With this in mind, I look at the ways in which the television set, as a domestic commodity that became increasingly ubiquitous in postwar American home (particularly with the dramatic increase in consumer spending on household items that took place in the five years after WWII) played a central role in launching *The Wizard of Oz* into its status as an “American Classic.” I argue that this widespread invasion<sup>10</sup> of the television played a fundamental role not only in (re)defining the American home—as both a space and a discursive ideological construction—but also it played a key role in altering the very meanings and narrative logics of *The Wizard of Oz* itself.

### Part One: The Cultural Logic of Oz Adaptation

The principle of film dictates that the consumer should be shown all his needs as capable of fulfillment, but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry. Not only does it make him believe that the deception it practices is satisfaction, but it goes further and implies that, whatever the state of affairs, he must put up with what is offered (...) The paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery. Both escape and elopement are predesigned to lead back to the starting point.

-Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Home! And this is my room, and you're all here. And I'm not gonna leave here ever, ever again, because I love you all, and - oh, Auntie Em - there's no place like home!

-Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

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<sup>10</sup> I use “invasion” here to echo some of the hostile language of “takeover” that was used by some of TV’s dissenters in the immediate postwar period. Katherine Fuller-Seeley (2007) demonstrates how some likened broadcast TV’s post-WWII arrival as a “home invasion,” one claiming, for example, that “television began to take over the American living room as a loud-mouthed, sometimes delightful, often shocking, thoroughly unpredictable guest.” A critic in *American Mercury* in 1952 called the television the “giant in the living room,” and proposed that fear of its potential impact on the home was “an almost universal reaction among thoughtful people.”

In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Lauren Berlant, author of the self-titled “national sentimentality” trilogy, looks critically at well-known works of literature and their subsequent stage and screen adaptations.<sup>11</sup> In closely reading these popular sites of American melodrama, Berlant identifies sentimental messages (geared particularly to women) that have been written into each adaptation of the original text. She calls this process the “cultural logic of adaptation,” by which she is referring to the conventions and technologies that popular adaptations or remakes use with the effect of glossing over overtly political elements of the primary text in the name of providing a generalized experience of national catharsis. This type of sentimentalization, she argues, is as an aesthetic strategy that provides audiences with a “feel-good and feel-right version of patriotic performance.”<sup>12</sup> I argue that a similar process can be traced in the historical trajectory and cultural life of *The Wizard of Oz*, which even since its earliest inception (that is, before its grand revival in 1939) has undergone countless remakes and adaptations.<sup>13</sup> Using the cultural logic of adaptation as a critical lens, I will revisit

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<sup>11</sup> The “trilogy” is a project that maps “the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space of attachment and identification.” The series begins with *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), followed by *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> L. Frank Baum, active in the theater himself throughout his life, adapted his own text into numerous stage plays, the first in 1902, which opened in Chicago and eventually played on Broadway for over two years. Then, beginning in 1908, he produced radio plays and several short films based on the series. Founding an independent film studio, the Oz Manufacturing Company, in 1914, Baum produced several (unsuccessful) short silent films: “The Patchwork Girl of Oz”; “The Magic Cloak of Oz”; and “His Majesty, The Scarecrow of Oz.” Of the innumerable remakes in American popular culture, a sampling includes: *The Land of Oz* (1932), a virtually unknown sequel; *Journey Back to Oz* (1974), an animated sequel; *The Wiz* (1978), a film directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Diana Ross and Michael Jackson, based on the Broadway musical (1974) of the same name; *Return to Oz* (1985), a (creepy!) Disney film; *Wicked* (2003), a Broadway musical based on Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel; *The Muppets’ Wizard of Oz* (2005), starring Ashanti, Queen Latifa and The Muppets; and *Apocalypse Oz* (2006), a short film crossover between *The Wizard of Oz* and *Apocalypse Now*. A computer-animated film produced by Summertime Entertainment

three of the key distinctions between L. Frank Baum's original 1900 text, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and the largely sentimentalized MGM filmic remake: (1) The film's extended treatment of Kansas and Dorothy's home and home life; (2) The protagonist's desire to escape her rural farm life—a desire that is born of the 1939 film and indexed in the musical ballad “Over the Rainbow”; and (3) The film's insistence that Oz exists only in dream. Closely reading these adaptive discrepancies between the primary text and its most celebrated adaptation will provide insight into how and why the MGM film, if not the original Baum text, has been immortalized as the ultimate glorification of the values and virtues of *home*. Further, the cultural status that the film has secured—as a permanent and ubiquitous fixture in contemporary Americana—makes a commonplace, which is to say it *normalizes* and ostensibly makes a civic *obligation*, of this desire to attain, return to, or identify with this mythic space and idea of home.

### ***Inventing the Rainbow***

To drive the Oz theme home in their documentary of the 1939 World's Fair, Lance Bird and Tom Johnson set much of their film's historical footage and individual commentary to the musical backdrop of the young Judy Garland singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Since its original performance, it is a song whose lyrics have become so familiar that they steadily echo from schoolrooms, nurseries, advertisements, and karaoke bars across the globe. Whether or not the connection was clear to both filmmakers, though I imagine it was, there are indeed striking parallels between this well-known ballad and the official theme song of the 1939 World's Fair, called “Dawn of a New Day,” and composed by George and Ira Gershwin.

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entitled *Dorothy of Oz*, was released in 2012. The most recent adaptation, a Disney prequel entitled *Oz: The Great and Powerful*, directed by Sam Raimi, came to theaters in March 2013.

**Dawn of a New Day (1939)**

Lose those cares and furrows  
Come, come where the five boroughs  
Join to fulfill a dream,  
Where all creeds and races  
Meet with Smiling Faces,  
Democracy reigns supreme.

Sound the brass, roll the drum:  
To the World of Tomorrow we come.  
See the sun through the gray:  
It's the dawn of a new day.

Here we come, young and old,  
Come to watch all the wonders unfold.  
And the tune that we play  
Is the dawn of a new day.

Tell the wolf at the door  
That we don't want him around any more,  
Better times, here to stay  
As we live and laugh the American way.

Listen one, listen all,  
There can be no resisting the call.  
Come, hail the dawn of a new day.

**Over the Rainbow (1939)**

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Way up high,  
There's a land that I heard of  
Once in a lullaby.

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Skies are blue,  
And the dreams that you dare to dream  
Really do come true.

Someday I'll wish upon a star  
And wake up where the clouds are far  
Behind me.  
Where troubles melt like lemon drops  
Away above the chimney tops  
That's where you'll find me.

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Bluebirds fly.  
Birds fly over the rainbow.  
Why then, oh why can't I?

If happy little bluebirds fly  
Beyond the rainbow  
Why, oh why can't I?

The Gershwin tune urges visitors to “lose those cares and furrows,” and to “come to the Fair” in order to “see the sun through the gray,” and to “fulfill a dream.” Surely striking a poignant chord amongst Depression-era audiences, Gershwin’s tune evokes the dream of an escape from the quotidian discontents of everyday life. At the movies, of course, Oz audiences would encounter MGM’s variation on this theme during the prophetic scene in which Dorothy, leaning against a haystack amidst the rubble of barnyard junk, famously longs for an escape from the black-and-white drudgery of Kansas life. And the description of this pined-for elsewhere, though neither Dorothy nor the viewing audience has actually seen it yet, bears a striking resemblance to the one imagined by songwriter Gershwin. In her inaugural rendition of “Over the Rainbow,” Dorothy,



while she is still at home, dreams of a place where “Skies are blue,” where “troubles melt like lemon drops,” and where “the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.” That this ode, to which Salman Rushdie refers as “a hymn—the hymn—to elsewhere,”<sup>14</sup> is unique to the 1939 cinematic production, is, of course, not entirely notable on its own. *The Wizard of Oz* is, after all, a musical production. There will be songs. What is notable, however, is the fact that the very sentiment on which the musical number relies—Dorothy’s desire for *escape*, for Rushdie’s *elsewhere*—is also historically specific to this version of the story. That is, the longing itself was a product of the 1939 adaptation and in fact has no place at all in L. Frank Baum’s original 1900 fairytale. In fact, during the writing of the film, screenwriter Noel Langley was instructed to “remember, at all times ‘that Dorothy is only motivated by one object in Oz, that is, how to get back home to her aunt Em, and every situation should be related to this main drive.’”<sup>15</sup>

In both versions, Dorothy’s journey through Oz is driven by her desire to return home. But in Baum’s version, the only force driving Dorothy’s desire to return is a concern for her aunt and uncle, who she is certain will be deeply worried about her. In the film, Dorothy is immediately homesick upon her arrival in Oz. Indeed, the popular refrain “There’s no place like home” takes center stage in MGM’s 1939 sentimentalized adaptation; it was almost *created* by the film since it is in fact articulated only once in Baum’s original tale, in a small early scene and with an affect that is somewhat tongue in cheek. And while the film spends nearly twenty minutes depicting Kansas, Baum’s text uses less than three full pages (of 261) to describe of Dorothy’s Kansas home. Further,

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<sup>14</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Patrick Hearn, L. Frank, Baum, and W. W. Denslow, *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (New York: Norton, 2000), 77.

the Kansas home of the film is downright lavish compared to the one-room farmhouse of Baum's protagonist.

As in the film, the house seems to stand alone in Baum's description of the sparse landscape of Kansas. Dorothy, when standing in the doorway and looking around "could see nothing but the great gray prairie on every side" and "not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions." The descriptor "gray" is repeated ten times in little more than two pages. Mirroring the imagery of emptiness in Baum's 1900 tale, the 1939 film version opens with Dorothy running home on a dusty road alongside her faithful terrier Toto, to the backdrop of the desolate Midwest plains and a cloudy sepia-colored sky that stretches without end for miles and miles. A single telegraph line divides the landscape and there is not a single house yet in sight. When she finally reaches her farmhouse, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry are hard at work trying to salvage their chickens after the incubator "went bad," while their three farmhands rush to feed the livestock and repair farm equipment. Em and Henry are stern in demeanor, with "careworn" expressions and little time to entertain Dorothy's idle concerns about the fate of her beloved dog. There is work to be done.

While noting the film version's centralization and repetition of Dorothy's sentimental catchphrase, it is useful as well to briefly consider the way in which MGM depicts Dorothy's Kansas home in order to understand the ways the film promotes a complete idealization of home in a way that Baum's original did not. We might recall from Chapter One that Baum's Dorothy lives in stark, abject poverty, in a one-room lumber shack that contains little more than two beds and a rusty cooking stove. In the film this farmhouse, while still somewhat austere, is warm and inviting. The viewer enters the home for the first time to witness Aunt Em seated across from the

malicious neighbor Miss Gulch in what appears to be the house's parlor. The rocking chair on which Aunt Em sits knitting has arms adorned with lace macramé; on the walls there is striped wallpaper and it is ornamented with a large glass mirror. In the corner by the front door is a small oak table on which rests a lamp, a potted plant and several framed photographs. Additionally, very clearly in the background is a small bedroom (not Dorothy's) with lace curtains draped over two large windows, and on top of a wool rug there is a small quilted bed and a wooden Windsor chair beside it. Dorothy's bedroom, which we visit briefly at both the beginning and end of the film, is similarly decorated, has floral wallpaper with two large paned windows, a bed, quilt, and a wooden side table that holds various knickknacks, a gas lamp, several books and a framed photograph. I am dwelling here on some careful detail of the home's interior in both texts in order to show that although Dorothy's home in the film is surely lacking in luxury, there is a degree of privacy, space, and comfort that sharply contrasts with the Kansas experience of Baum's original. With its multiple rooms and separate sleeping quarters, along with curtains, clean linens, and various decorations, the home in the film far exceeds the kinds of living conditions of most Dust Bowl farmers.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the 1939 film's ultimate celebration of and allegiance to the idea of *home*, it is crucial to recall that director Victor Fleming's Dorothy initially *wants* to leave Kansas. She hopes to "wake up" in a carefree land where her "troubles" are "far behind" her. Recall that this Dorothy even runs away from home at the film's start, returning only because she fears for her dear Aunt Em's breaking heart. Indeed, the writers of the film's musical score, Harold Arlen and E. Y. "Yip"

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<sup>16</sup> Lynette Carpenter, "There's No Place Like Home": The Wizard of Oz and American Isolationism" *Film and History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1985): 37-45. This discrepancy is also noted in Geoff Ryman's novel *Was* (1992), as the aged Dorothy, upon seeing the misrepresentation of her story on television, insists: "Who said they could put me on that thing? They got it wrong! Wasn't like that. Only one room we had and couldn't afford no hired hands, I can tell you" (239).

Harburg, actually take pains to show the depth of Dorothy's frustration and longing, both agreeing that the main objective of "Over the Rainbow" would be "to delineate Dorothy and to give an emotional touch to the scene where she is frustrated and in trouble."<sup>17</sup> The cyclone that plucks the house from the ground and rudely deposits it in foreign soil is an unwelcomed nuisance in Baum's turn-of-the-century text, not the act of unconscious-wish-fulfillment-disguised-as-natural-disaster that we encounter in the film. All of this is to say that the musical moment of longing which is contained in Judy Garland's wistful ballad is pivotal in underscoring the central differences between MGM's story of Oz and L. Frank Baum's 1900 tale. The most crucial of these discrepancies is the treatment and representation of what seems to be the most central theme of both texts—*home*.

In explaining the extended treatment of Kansas in the film, Oz biographer Aljean Harmetz suggests that "[the scriptwriters] felt it necessary to have an audience relate to Dorothy in a real world before transporting her to a magic one."<sup>18</sup> The film's lingering on the dreary Kansas plains, in comparison to its short-lived appearance in the book, performed the following double function for the filmmakers: First, it set the stage for young Judy Garland's monumental rendition of "Over the Rainbow," which, although it was nearly cut from the film, won that year's Academy-Award for best original song;<sup>19</sup> Second, the viewer's extended stay in Kansas enables multiple and sustained visible references to the Depression that would likely have resonated with much of the film's

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz: Movie Magic and Studio Power in the Prime of MGM and the Miracle of Production* (New York: Hyperion, 1988), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Harmetz, *Making of Oz*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> The producers actually wanted to omit this song from the final film. Mervin Leroy thought it "slowed down the picture," and Mayer felt that the film was too long. Composer E.Y. Harburg thought it was "too old for the character." Interestingly enough, it was Ira Gershwin, who wrote the theme song to the 1939 New York World's Fair theme song, who was called upon to listen to Judy Garland sing "Somewhere," and he had a more favorable response.

original audience. In addition, despite the relative luxury of Kansas farmhouse depicted in the film (in comparison to the actual living conditions of Mid-western agricultural territories) the landscape is still portrayed as a place in which technology either didn't exist or was extremely unreliable. Recall, for example, the crisis of the incubator that "went bad."

Considering how the film lingers on technology's failure in Kansas, Joshua David Bellin points out that the only functional technologies in the film's opening frames are distinctively *nineteenth-century*, such as telegraph wires, horse-drawn buggies, and kerosene lamps.<sup>20</sup> Even without the "nearly universal symbols of the 1930s [such] as motor vehicles, telephones, and radios," Bellin notes, the *machine* remains an enduring figure in the representation of rural, almost pre-Industrial, Kansas—often despite, or even because of, its absence.

Indeed, in the film's deliberate references to older technology in its opening scenes, and its simultaneous depiction of the absence or disuse of modern technology in Kansas in general, MGM seems to be highlighting the abject *failure* of technology. Bellin looks at the opening frame of the film, for example, in which a rubber car tire hangs from a tree as Dorothy takes her first steps onto her aunt and uncle's property. "The sine qua non of Ford's machine age," he writes, "so needless here that it can serve only as a child's toy."<sup>21</sup> The repurposed tire swinging from the tree, along

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<sup>20</sup> Joshua David Bellin, "I Don't Know How It Works!: The Wizard of Oz and the Technology of Alienation," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* Vol. 60, No. 4 (2004). Arguing that the 1939 Oz film performs the work of social ideology, Joshua Bellin focuses in particular on the anti-technological discourse that he believes is its narrative crux. Looking at what he calls the "ideological operations" of the film, he discusses its ironically anti-technology message in light of the fact that it simultaneously relies on and disseminates this message *through* a highly specialized and spectacular technological medium. Just as the Wizard is a smokescreen for the otherwise powerless "man behind the curtain," so does the film itself conceal its ideological mechanism, which Bellin argues, "is not merely the conservative, corporate ideology of Hollywood but the ideology of American capitalism itself: the pervasive, underlying structure of beliefs about social order and privilege so deeply ingrained that it normally appears invisible, but that underwent such severe strain during the Depression that for millions of Americans, the promise of technological utopia became visible as a fantasy if not an outright deception" (89).

<sup>21</sup> Bellin, "I Don't Know How it Works," 74.

with the power lines that divide the landscape and the broken electric incubator are each symbols of the machine and of the city—symbols that work to acknowledge the presence, or perhaps future-presence, of technology both within and beyond Kansas.

It is also suggestive that as Dorothy sings her “song of yearning,” as composer Harold Arlen has called it, the viewer will also register another brief reference to Ford’s automobile as the young girl braces herself behind a defunct wagon wheel, peering out above the metal helm as if it were a steering wheel and as if she might, one day, *drive* to this elsewhere—leaving the both the farm and her troubles “behind her.”



Fig. 4.1 Screenshot from the 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*.

At the very moment in which Dorothy clutches this wheel, so begins the verse that refers to a “Someday” when the clouds will be far behind her: an isolated reference to an actual *time* in which

her troubles would be far behind her, rather than the mythic *place*, the *somewhere*, with which all of other stanzas begin. Things *will* get better, the film seems to imply under its breath while simultaneously hailing technology as, quite literally here, the vehicle that will make it so. “To the World of Tomorrow we come,” we are assured in another musical number of the same year, the official ballad of the 1939 World’s Fair. *See the sun through the gray, Dorothy, It’s the dawn of a new day.*<sup>22</sup>

But Dorothy, like many viewers of the film, cannot yet see nor fully trust this promise, since her Kansas embodies a world that has largely been forgotten by the promises and technological advances of the twentieth century. Dorothy’s lullaby, bridging the gap between Kansas and Oz and delivered from a black-and-white world of hard labor, inconsistent technology, and little time for leisure and pleasure, thus prepares both Dorothy and the viewer to embrace, only to eventually disavow, the technological (and Technicolor) utopia that they will soon encounter in Oz.

### ***The limitations of dream:***

Another discrepancy between Baum’s original tale and the MGM adaptation is the film’s insistence that Dorothy’s journey through Oz is merely a dream. “But it wasn’t a dream, it was a place!” Dorothy insists at the film’s close. “And you and you and you...and you were there,” she chides to the familiar faces that crowd her bedside (notably, from within a bedroom that didn’t

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<sup>22</sup> Writes Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*: “Oz was resurrected out of the misery of the 1930s, an alternate vision of America, a mirror that reflected America’s disgrace and promise. Somewhere over the rainbow, there was a land we all dream of, and ironically it was realized through the cooperative efforts of numerous people and marked as fantasy. But, in fact, the fantasy was the real, materialist outcome of the needs of individuals who in a group effort wanted to mark what was missing in American society” (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 122.

exist in Baum's original.) In the film, it is from within this same bedroom that the frightening dream sequence is initiated, as Dorothy suffers a harsh blow to the forehead from a flying windowpane that was knocked loose by the force of the cyclone. It was the tornado that transported Dorothy to Oz in Baum's version as well, but in the book Oz is a place that exists just as surely as Kansas does. This discrepancy between the original and cinematic versions is crucial.

Many films of this era of "Golden Age" Hollywood engage a narrative device that film scholar Ina Rae Hark has termed the "home-leaving fantasy."<sup>23</sup> This convention, which borrows its structure from traditional folktales, is also found frequently in coming-of-age narratives in which the protagonist is forced to leave home. Just as the idea of mobility itself is intensely gendered, as previous chapters have explored at length, so too does this fantasy of leaving home have significantly gendered implications. "The boys coming-of-age story is about leaving home to save the world," Bonnie Friedman writes, while for girls it is about "relinquishing the world beyond home." Several scholars have made comparisons between Dorothy and Huck Finn, but Dorothy's coming-of-age adventure only leads her to redomestication, back to the home she escaped: where Huck "sought to throw off the restrictive middle-class conventions of nineteenth-century American society, [Dorothy] does not have the option of 'lighting out for the territories.' She not only can, but *must* go home."<sup>24</sup> She must do this for several reasons: to help on the farm, to take care of her parental figures, but mostly, she literally *must* return to Kansas because Oz is "only a dream."

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<sup>23</sup> Ina Ray Hark "Movie-Going, Home-Leaving, and the Problematic Girl Protagonist of The Wizard of Oz," in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice: The Cinemas of Girlhood* ed. Frances K. Gateward and Murray Pommerance (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Charles Rzepka (1987), qtd. in Hark, *Sugar and Spice*, 29. See also Luce on the patriarchal home via Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." (Man's ability to have a home—to return to his original identity/lost mother – is possible only by the "dereliction" of the woman/homemaker as she provides the material nurturance of the self-same identity and the container that gives him his sense of boundary.) See also Iris Marion Young, "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme," in which she critiques the



Surely Baum's Dorothy also wishes to return home throughout her quest in Oz, even if the reader is not entirely convinced as to why, but, remember, in Baum's version of the tale, Dorothy never wished to leave home in the first place. In fact, the screenwriters of the 1939 film turn the *impossibility* of remaining in Oz (because it is a dream from which the girl will inevitably awake), into both a pedagogy of womanhood and a more general ideological imperative that involves returning to, staying, and indeed *wanting* to stay home.<sup>25</sup> Of all the "lessons" the female protagonist could have garnered throughout her adventure—about friendship, courage, ingenuity, kindness, sacrifice—her crowning realization at the end of her journey, which she relays to the Good Witch before being whisked back to Kansas, is that "if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any farther than my own back yard, because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with." With this phrase, a complete creation of the 1939 film, Dorothy seems to accept domestic ideology's equivalence of woman with *place*, and she defines that place as *home*.<sup>26</sup> The difference between the book and its cinematic adaptation is key here as well. The Hollywood

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presupposition in Irigaray's theory of a modern, bourgeois conception of home, in *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 314-337.

<sup>25</sup> Some readings of Baum's series suggest that Oz itself stages this kind of approach to domesticity and "proper" femininity. Vivian Wagner, for example, considers the way in which Baum's second book in the series, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), works to "manufacture femininity itself." She also discusses the "utopian domesticity" that culminates in *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910). She writes: "In its manufacturing practices, of both magically animated beings and women, Baum's Oz novels sublimate worries about contemporary corporate practices and feminism, along with anxieties about the role of the industrialist in moral and domestic regulation. With its uneasy households and bodies, Oz rewrites the Fordist fantasy developing in the early twentieth century, even as it disrupts and subverts it. Henry Ford represented, in the early part of the century, a (masculine) force of industrial power and a (feminine) force of moral regulation. Here at the interstices of domesticity and industrialization modern industry began." (Vivian Wagner, "Unsettling Oz: Technological Anxieties in the Novels of L. Frank Baum," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006). For readings on Baum's feminist leanings as well as the influence of his mother-in-law Matilda Gage, pioneer of the women's rights movement, on his politics, see Alison Lurie, "The Oddness of Oz," *New York Review* (2000); Paige Rohrer "Wearing the Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in *The Wizard of Oz*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1996); Katharine M. Rogers "L. Frank Baum: Creator of Oz," (New York: St. Martins Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Ina Rae Hark, *Sugar and Spice*, 33.

heroine is made to learn and internalize a “lesson,” that any desire that leads her away from the home is patently *false*. This “lesson” is, in a way, Dorothy’s coming of age realization—a nod to her successful inculcation of a near century old domestic ideology wherein the individual must find “meaning and satisfaction” at home and nowhere else.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Baum’s Dorothy, in each of his thirteen sequels, returns willfully and repeatedly back to Oz. Indeed this moralizing speech is absent in the original. But in the film, with three clicks of her heels, Dorothy must repeat the phrase “There’s no place like home,” as if writing it on a schoolroom blackboard until it sticks. The narrative of the film in fact *guarantees* that this is so by depicting (1) Oz, (2) the fulfillment of desire in general, and (3) *any* alternative to domestic life for a young girl, as a childish fantasy. If Dorothy is to contentedly remain in Kansas, on the farm, she must adopt a kind of self-willed amnesia—she must forget or sublimate her once-felt longing to leave by convincing herself that there really is no world beyond this one. But how and why does the audience go along with her? In other words, by what magic does the film convince its audience that rather than Oz, it is in fact *home* that is the lost Eden, the place worth fighting for?

One of the ways by which technologies of adaptation succeed in providing audiences with a sense of “feel-good and feel-right” pleasure, in Lauren Berlant’s words, is by “figuring in the component of critical anti-normativity that marks the liberal sentimental text’s ambition to provide *more than entertainment*” (my emphasis).<sup>28</sup> The first audiences of Dorothy’s saga, of Hollywood’s Technicolor adaptation of Oz, would also have been temporarily swept away by the fantastic “elsewhere” that was the cinematic experience in general. Not only was/is the cinema a powerful

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<sup>27</sup> See Tamara K. Hareven "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective" *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1991): 263.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 72.

vehicle of escape from the realities of everyday life, but the *musical* genre adopted by the 1939 remake may also have had a part in the shaping and re-shaping of the film's ideological message through its adaptation. Film Studies scholar Richard Dyer considers, for example, how the Hollywood musical packages and sells the idea of an American *utopia*—a collective desire that involves escape, wish fulfillment, and the *feeling* that “things could be better, that something other than what *is* can be imagined and maybe realized.”<sup>29</sup> However, in order to sidestep the danger involved in highlighting the “gap between what is and what could be,” the musical genre must engage a complex process of “work[ing] through these contradictions (...) in such a way as to ‘manage’ them, to make them seem to disappear.”<sup>30</sup> Because the “managing” of everyday anxieties in this formula often comes at the expense of neutralizing or denying other structural inequalities having to do with gender and sexuality, racism, or class struggle (even as it may “represent” them), as Dyer suggests, this convention parallels Berlant's logic of adaptation. Both are looking critically at the *emotional* signification of particular entertainment forms, and how they obtain these “sensibilities” in relation to the social and historical context in which they are produced (and, in the case of *Oz*, continually reproduced). Although Berlant does not discuss *The Wizard of Oz* in her discussion of American musical and film adaptations, it is not difficult to see how many aspects of the cultural life of the *Wizard of Oz*—its original textual form, its stage and screen adaptations, its shifting modes and spaces of reception, its habitual reshowing, and its ubiquitous place as a

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<sup>29</sup> I highlight “feeling” here because Dyer's attention to the importance of *affect* in this process is crucial, especially in light of my pairing here with Berlant's sentimentality. Dyer writes: “Entertainment does not, however, present *models* of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Thomas More, William Morris, *et al.* Rather, *the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies*. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production” (20, my emphases).

<sup>30</sup> Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia” in *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 2002), 27.

commodity and ideal in the American consciousness—make it an exemplary, almost overdetermining example of a “national cultural industry” that is “dedicated to substituting qualities of nationally coded experience and feeling for class reference and historical memory.”<sup>31</sup>

## Part II: Television, Oz, and the Making of the Modern American Home

When television has fulfilled its destiny, man’s sense of physical limitation will be swept away, and his boundaries of sight and hearing will be the limits of the earth itself. With this may come a new horizon, a new philosophy, a new sense of freedom and greatest of all, perhaps a finer and broader understanding between all the peoples of the world.

- President of RCA, David Sarnoff’s opening speech at 1939 dedication<sup>32</sup>

Privacy is the Oz of America.

-Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling”<sup>33</sup>

When I was growing up in Piedmont, West Virginia, the TV was the ritual arena for the drama of race.

-Henry Louis Gates, “The Living Room”<sup>34</sup>

On April 29, 1939, ten days before the official opening of the New York World’s Fair, David Sarnoff, then president of the Radio Corporation of America, delivered a speech at the RCA pavilion entitled “The Birth of an Industry.” His speech would be broadcast on the 62<sup>nd</sup> floor of the corporation’s national headquarters, ten miles away, at what is now Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan. “It is with a feeling of humbleness,” he proclaimed before the cameras, “that I come to this moment of announcing the birth in this country of a new art so important in its

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<sup>31</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> “Dedication of RCA Seen on Television,” *New York Times* (1923-Current file) 1939.

<sup>33</sup> In this essay, Lauren Berlant explains further: “Based on a notion of safe space, a hybrid space of home and law in which people will act legally and lovingly towards one another, free from the determinations of history or the coercions of pain, the constitutional theorization of sexual privacy is drawn from a lexicon of romantic sentiment, a longing for space where there is no trouble...” in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law* ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 60.

<sup>34</sup> Excerpt in *Home: American Writers Remember Rooms of Their Own* ed. Sharon Sloan Fiffer and Steve Fiffer (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

implications that it is bound to affect all society. It is an art which shines like a torch of hope in a troubled world.”<sup>35</sup> As with earlier technologies, and in particular communication technologies, the promoters of the television lauded it as the ultimate symbol of American progress and national destiny, claiming the medium’s intrinsically “democratic” function—it was a medium which could deepen human and global “understanding” across space and “between all the of the world,” as Sarnoff would proselytize. Equally ecstatic about television and its capacity to enact some kind of global village, NBC president Pat Weaver would soon pronounce that television would turn “the entire world into a small town.” Weaver would also later suggest that the television must be used to “upgrade humanity,” and it must be “the shining center of the home.”<sup>36</sup> More than mere propaganda, this kind of starry-eyed faith in television’s potential to nurture democracy and uplift both the individual and the nation is nothing new. Rather, such discourses of *technological utopianism*, which uncritically equate technology with progress, have a long history that can be traced back at least to the advent of nineteenth century technologies—from railroads and electric lighting to the telegraph and the telephone.<sup>37</sup> Further, within the discourses and myths that accompany the arrival of a new technology is a celebration, even a promise, of its power to fulfill some material manifest destiny and to bring the nation together.

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<sup>35</sup> Gary Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Pat “Sylvester” Weaver, “Radio-Television: Credo in Broadcasting’s Tomorrow (1954),” *Variety Archive: 1905-2000*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> See Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies were New* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Richard Butsch *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For fascinating work on the discourses surrounding the emergence of particular new technologies see Laura Burd Schiavo on the stereoscope in “A Collection of Endless Extent and Beauty: Stereographs, Vision, Taste, and the American Middle Class,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (2003); Lisa Gitelman on both the phonograph and the world wide web in *Always Already New* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); and Sherry Turkle on the computer in *Life on the Screen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) and *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered the first television broadcast to announce the official opening of the New York World's Fair in April of 1939, a new kind of public ceremony emerged. Though it had not yet made its way into many American homes, as I will elaborate in further detail below, in the decade following the Fair, the television became a popular mode of display and entertainment in *public* spaces like department store windows, bars, and furniture or appliance stores. Indeed, eight years after this inaugural broadcast, television would bring in its first mass audience as Dumont and RCA organized an experimental airing of the 1947 World Series (the New York Yankees versus the Brooklyn Dodgers), which would be available in several major East Coast cities.<sup>38</sup> Nearly four million Americans saw parts of the broadcast, with 87% of this spectatorship occurring in a public venue. At the World's Fair, seeing the world condensed, repackaged, and reflected on a tiny portable screen for the first time must have seemed a thing of science fiction. And just as we might envision the first encounter with the television to be both awesome and terrifying, perhaps we can also imagine the sense of excitement, camaraderie, and sublime simultaneity that must have filled barrooms that night, eight years later, as friends and strangers gathered together to watch, for the first time, the crowned American pastime—live and in color.

Along with the introduction of commercial television at the Fair, and the birth of a new kind of public ceremony that emerged from this launch, there are several other legacies of the Fair that would eventually play a large part in articulating the meanings and messages of the television in the American home. As noted above, one of the primary goals of the 1939 New York World's Fair was to establish a sense of national unity. Along with this, the Fair's designers and corporate

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<sup>38</sup> From *The Television Window to the World, Modern Marvels*, Dir. Joshua Hanig [New York, N.Y.]: A&E Home Video, 1996. Alexander Street Press, Jaffe Productions, History Channel, Hearst Entertainment, Arts & Entertainment Network, and E. Home Video.

sponsors generated and promoted the idea of the “average” American and, relatedly, the “typical” American family. The television, I will show, once it became a mainstay in the American home, provided an ideal arena in which each of these ideas and desires—the nation, the family, or the national family—could be affirmed and textually mediated. With *The Wizard of Oz* as a frame, this section will focus on how the text itself along with the context of the film’s televisual debut in 1956 worked to revisit and solidify these imperatives.

### ***“The Folks You Know”: Selling the Idea of the Average at the New York World’s Fair***

The idea of the “Average American,” and, relatedly, the “Typical American Consumer” were vital to the Fair’s vision of progress and the nation’s future. Cultural historian Warren Susman goes so far, in fact, as to suggest that the very concept of “the average” was born during the period between 1935 and the end of World War II. On the importance of considering the concept of the “average” in looking at 1930s American culture, Susman writes: “By the 1930s additional statistical facts could be added to complete the picture of the average American: Public opinion polls, from techniques developed in the mid-1930s, provided “scientific” evidence about thoughts and attitudes.” More and more, he writes, this “statistical culture,” and this conception of the “average” American, “became central to cultural thinking and planning. *He or she was soon invested as well with the sentimental aura that went with the more mystical notion of the people*”(my emphasis).<sup>39</sup>

One method by which Fair organizers and planners propagated this celebration of “the middle,” can be seen in the multiple essay contests that they held, in which individuals and families across the nation would vie for the label of “most typical” American. During the Fair’s

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<sup>39</sup> Warren Susman, “The People’s Fair: The Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society,” in Helen A. Harrison et al. *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World’s Fair, 1939-40* (New York: The Queens Museum/New York University Press, 1980), 18-19.

second season, for example, 12-year-old Alfred Roberts Jr. of New York earned the prestigious title of “Typical American Boy” by a judging committee led by New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. The panel agreed that it was on the basis of Roberts’ “physical attributes” (he was *white*, with “hazel eyes and sandy hair”) and stand-up principles that he was selected.



Fig. 4.2 “City’s ‘Typical Boy’ Wins Title at Fair.” *New York Times*, September 29, 1940.

**“TYPICAL AMERICAN BOY” AT THE FAIR**

Alfred Roberts, who was chosen for that title yesterday, is shown with Mayor La Guardia and James H. Marshall, president of the Board of Education.

Times Wide World

These principles were carefully outlined in his essay. “The typical American boy,” Roberts’ essay reads, “should possess the same qualities as those of the early American pioneers.” He continues:

He should be hardy, dependable, courageous and loyal to his beliefs. He should be clean, cheerful and friendly, willing to help and be kind to others. He is an “all-



around boy”—interested in sports, hobbies, and the world around him. (...) He is usually busy at some handicraft or hobby, and is always thinking of something new to do or make. That is why America still has a future.<sup>40</sup>

That same season, a similar type of contest challenged the forty-eight U.S. states to nominate their most typical American family. To enter, families would submit essays to their local newspapers in hopes of winning the grand prize of an all-expense-paid trip to the New York World's Fair, where they would live for a week in one of the model homes that was built by the Federal Housing Authority and displayed on the Fairgrounds. But no promotional venture went further in promoting the ideals of the Fair and venerating its “typical” visitor than the full color 50-minute long motion picture sponsored by Westinghouse Electric, entitled *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair* (1939). The film follows a fictional middle-class family that has traveled to New York from Middle America to stay with their grandmother and visit the Fair. Husband, wife, one son and one daughter, the Middletons, hailing from Indiana, are meant to be instantly recognizable to American viewers: From “Everywhere, U.S.A.,” they are “just like you,” as a 1939 advertisement proclaims, “...a family of folks you know, friends who live just around the corner from everyone.”

The family's father, Tom Middleton, is a friendly pragmatic businessman from Indiana. His wife Jane is a dutiful housewife, fascinated by the timesaving electrical appliances on display in Westinghouse's Hall of Electrical Living. The two children are Babs, their college-age daughter who lives in suburban New York with her grandmother, and younger brother, fourteen-year-old Bud, who, although energetic and bright, is pessimistic about his future prospects for employment given the country's bleak economic opportunities. At the Fair, young Bud is riveted by the displays

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<sup>40</sup> “City's ‘Typical Boy’ Wins Title at Fair.” *New York Times*, September 29, 1940, 36.

of products, industrial marvels, and technology on display in the Westinghouse Building—he speaks into a television camera in one scene, in another he visits the Junior Science Hall and the Hall of Power. As he makes his way eagerly through the exhibits, Bud begins to embody the optimistic ideology of the Fair. A new world is emerging; one in which there will be an abundance of jobs in industry and manufacturing. In essence, the film traces a young boy’s steady realization of the nation’s inevitable forward progress—a future that would be made possible by technology, private enterprise, and a wealth and variety of new consumer products.



Fig. 4.3 “The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair.”  
Westinghouse Advertisement, 1939.

The real dramatic thrust of the narrative, however, involves a romantic triangle between daughter Babs, her wholesome hometown sweetheart Jim Treadway, now an engineer and guide at the Westinghouse Building at the Fair, and leftist Nicholas Makaroff, her tedious art teacher who despises the “capitalist machinery” of the Fair—the two figures embodying the competing

ideologies surrounding industrialization and progress as it is projected both by Westinghouse and by the Fair writ large. In the end, of course, she chooses Jim, and at the film's close they embrace on the stairs of Westinghouse Electrical pavilion, together watching the fireworks over a night sky at the Fair.

In 1937, two years before the Fair opened, scholar and playwright Eugene Raskin feared that these grand exhibitions could no longer thrive because the cinema had supplanted their modes of spectacle. To succeed, he thought, these expositions had to “create what is basically a spectacle, which people all over the world will pay to see, and in which commercial organizations will pay for the privilege of participating.” His logical conclusion, then, was that “the best way to build a World's Fair is not to build it at all, but to make a motion picture out of it.”<sup>41</sup> Raskin was evidently not alone in these assumptions, considering that *The Middletons* was one of nearly five hundred films that were featured at various locations throughout the New York World's Fair. Motion pictures could provide spectacular entertainment, while simultaneously positioning *commodities* within national narratives of progress.

At the same time that *The Middletons* endorses a corporate vision of the American future, it simultaneously links “family values” with an American consumer ethic, and it is through the imagery of the *home*—past, present, and future—that these two interests collide. In addition to the film's scenes that take place at the World's Fair and index the home in some way (such as the time-saving domestic appliances featured in the Hall of Electrical Living,) much of the film's drama—indeed nearly half of its runtime—takes place not at the Fair, but inside Grandma Harrison's house. In direct opposition to the images of scarcity and self-sacrifice that inflect public discourses at this time, (the discourses of what Lizabeth Cohen labels the “citizen consumer,”) Grandma's home is a

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<sup>41</sup> Eugene Raskin, “Fairer Than Fair,” *Pencil Points* 18 (February 1937): 91.

place of warmth, safety, and family, with bountiful shared meals, pristine furnishing and décor, and numerous commodity comforts. The filmmakers are very deliberate in ensuring that viewers take note of these desirable household goods by rendering them in rich, almost exaggerated Technicolor so that they stand out in the picture.<sup>42</sup> In line with the organizers of the Fair, the creators of the *Middleton Family* knew well that the home was more than a physical structure. Rather, it was a profound expression of how technology impacts everyday life. In the words of scholar Joseph Cusker, the Fair itself “contributed to the definition of a new American culture adapted to the machine world.” What is more, made readily apparent in this promotional film, the “perception of the home and its various physical components was linked to its view of the family as a consumer unit.”<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, for Fair visitors and audiences consuming these images of beautifully equipped homes and the happy family lives inside them, with the advent of the Second World War just on the horizon, these dreams would have to be indefinitely shelved. The fantasy would be revived and revamped just over a decade later, however, when the television would take center stage in the postwar consumer landscape, finally making its way into “average” living rooms across the country.<sup>44</sup> Epitomized by the *Middleton Family* film, the ideal of the American consumer and the *everyfamily* that the New York World’s Fair promoted would also help lay the groundwork for the overt celebration of nuclear “family values” and the rise of what Lizabeth Cohen has called

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<sup>42</sup> William L. Bird, *Better Living: Advertising, Media and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 143. This focus on consumption as a patriotic duty rather than self-indulgence prefigures the shift in moral/economic geographies of the postwar consumer landscape wherein, as Lizabeth Cohen argues in *A Consumer’s Republic*, mass consumption became a “civic responsibility” rather than a luxury, designed to give “full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation” (113).

<sup>43</sup> Cusker, Joseph P. “The World of Tomorrow: Science, Culture, and Community at the New York World’s Fair,” in *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World’s Fair 1939/40*, ed. Helen A. Harrison (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> William Bird, *Better Living*, 143.

a “consumer republic” that would culminate in the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it is easy to imagine the emotional appeal of a stable and abundant home life in the wake of the Depression of the 1930s, and similarly as an antidote to the fear and uncertainty of the Second World War.

### *Television’s Uneasy Entry into the American Home*

Just as technology is always revealing nature from a new perspective, so also, as it impinges on human beings, it constantly makes for variations in their most primordial passions, fears, and images of longing.

-Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

In spite of RCA’s staunch promotional efforts at the Fair, it would take nearly a decade before David Sarnoff’s impassioned mission to have a television in every household in America would really gain momentum. Although the new technology was stunning, and must have seemed a thing of magic and mystery to those in attendance at the “World of Tomorrow,” actual sales of television sets at the event fell far short of the numbers its promoters had projected. The device was too expensive, for one thing, (a television set was about the price of a new car) and most Americans lived outside of its broadcast range. Its commercial launch was largely unsuccessful, and one survey concluded that fewer than one in seven fair visitors “expressed interest in buying a

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<sup>45</sup> For extensive work on 1950s postwar consumption habits and the cultural discourses surrounding domestic consumption, see, for example: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) and Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003). May explains, for example, that rather than spending flexible income on personal luxury items, Americans were far more likely to spend their money at home. In the five years after WWII, consumer spending increased sixty percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent (147). Purchasing items for the home, and in particular for the family, also helped assuage traditional American anxieties about consumption.

set in the near future.”<sup>46</sup> Only eight hundred television sets were purchased throughout the entire run of the fair.

Apart from its prohibitive cost and limited broadcast range, the slow momentum of commercial television during and immediately after the Fair may also have been in part an issue of unfortunate timing. Heated corporate disputes between the FCC and broadcast networks delayed efforts to effectively market domestic television for several years, and once these issues finally began to be resolved in 1941, any and all large-scale efforts to publicize, advertise, or circulate the home television were again shelved, as television technology was geared primarily towards the war effort. Significant sales of commercial television sets would not occur until the end of 1947. Television flourished, then, which is to say that it became available and affordable, at the same time as the mass suburbanization that was taking place in the postwar U.S. landscape, and with just as much speed and vigor.

As a result of a nationwide housing shortage after the war, along with new federal home loan policies which made it possible for (white) middle-class families to purchase a home and attain a middle-class lifestyle in the suburbs, there was a massive postwar housing boom, which peaked at 1.65 million in 1955 and stayed above 1.5 million a year for the rest of the decade. As Elaine Tyler May makes clear, “white” here includes immigrants and working-class ethnic families with light skin, for whom the suburbs enabled a new kind of assimilation—a way to leave their “outsider status” behind along with their ethnically segregated urban neighborhood. People of color, on the other hand, were systematically excluded from suburban life (and the upward mobility and capital accumulation that came with it) regardless of whether or not they could afford

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<sup>46</sup> Joseph Corn and Brian Horrigan, *Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 27.

it. This in turn led to a nation in which class lines were increasingly blurred while racial divisions became paramount. Thus, “from a pre-war nation made up of many identifiable ethnic groups, postwar American society divided rigidly along the color line.”<sup>47</sup> By 1960, 62 percent of American families owned their own homes, compared to 43 percent in 1940. Nearly 90 percent of these new homes were built in the suburbs.<sup>48</sup> Throughout this post-1945 boom, the home itself—as both a site and a symbol—became the very engine of a mass consumption economy,<sup>49</sup> fueling the desire and demand for a vast range of household commodities. In the five years after World War II, American consumer spending increased nearly 60 percent; the most considerable rise in spending was directed towards household furnishings and consumer appliances.<sup>50</sup> The television was chief among these purchases. By 1955, television sets had been installed in the majority of homes throughout the country, although this transition—which was both spatial and social—was not altogether seamless, and the new technology’s expanding presence in the American home was not wholeheartedly welcomed. Members of the cultural elite and the general public alike cautioned of the social and moral consequences of television in the home.

To be sure, for each disciple of Weaver and Sarnoff’s prophecies about television’s redemptive impact on American character and national life, there were scores of disbelievers who had a much darker vision of the kind of world the television would create. Many believed that the

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<sup>47</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, xx.

<sup>48</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Cynthia Henshorn, in *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America 1939-1959* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), shows how throughout the war, the image of the private suburban house became a crucial symbol within narratives of national progress and the promise of postwar prosperity. Homeownership, along with the ability and freedom to purchase a wide variety of consumer products were “rights” that American soldiers were allegedly “fighting for,” as much of the propagandizing wartime print media and advertising proclaimed. Looking at a vast collection of World War II-era media, her study analyzes the ways in which, aiming to boost national morale, they consistently endorsed the “Americanness” of the single-family detached home.

<sup>50</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 121-23.

device was an instrument of surveillance, while others warned not only of the social ills it would wreak, but also of the physical, even fatal consequences of its domestic presence—some even believing that diseases and contaminants could be transmitted through the airwaves.<sup>51</sup> Along with its capacity to “bring the world to the home,” as Sarnoff envisioned, the television might also result in the complete collapsing of the public sphere and of traditional gender roles inside and outside the home.<sup>52</sup> Men would be emasculated by choosing television watching over traditional male leisure activities like sports, hands-on hobbies and outdoor pursuits, while women would be endlessly distracted from their household duties and routines.<sup>53</sup> What would result if men, exhausted from long hours at work, wanted only to then retreat from the private sphere in favor of the privacy of the TV room? Or if the cacophonous voices on the television screen worked to dilute the traditional father’s authority? Still more critics warned that, with the domestic television, traditional Protestant values of hard work and self-discipline would be superseded by an ethic of hedonism and leisure. In fact, this emerging discourse—the concern that television will create a passive American citizenry who will become increasingly isolated from each other—persists in contemporary debates surrounding the potential numbing effects of mass media, and these concerns of audience passivity go hand in hand with ongoing concerns about privatization. This is

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<sup>51</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for Tv: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 31-59, 113-115.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of how the entry of commercial television into suburban homes disrupted older patterns of family life and “encouraged fragmentation of the family into separate segments of the consumer market,” see George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* Vol. 16, No. 16 (1988): 79.

<sup>53</sup> For further discussion on this fear of emasculation see William Boddy, “The Amateur, the Housewife, and the Salesroom Floor,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 1, no. 1 (1998), and for work on the anxiety surrounding the television’s potential impact on women and domestic duties see also Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).



to say that the “domesticity” of the television—what now seems its conceptual inseparability from discourses of home entertainment—should certainly not be taken for granted.

In looking briefly at the early years of commercial television and the public ambivalence surrounding its presence in the American home, I follow media historian Lisa Gitelman’s (2006) assertion that “looking at the novelty years, transitional states, and identity crises of different media stands to tell us much; both about the course of media history and about the broad conditions by which media and communication are and have been shaped.”<sup>54</sup> The tendency to naturalize media technologies, or to ascribe to them their own agency, belies their embeddedness in cultural and historical processes. As Carolyn Marvin (1988) explains, “Media are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the competing discourses that surround the technology, both then and now—claims that television will either save or destroy “American” culture and values—as well as its unique position as both an artifact and a communications medium, make it a fruitful site for understanding how the movement of commodities across intimate thresholds can reveal *and* puncture the powerful, and indeed powerfully gendered, cultural narratives surrounding public and private space, inside and outside—home and *not* home.

Fears about technology’s effects on the home have flourished, in both public and intellectual circles, since at least the nineteenth century. As we saw, for example, in General Electric advertisements in the previous chapter, corporations frequently design and advertise new technologies in ways that respond to and assuage the public’s perceptions and anxieties about

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<sup>54</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, 8.

machines.<sup>56</sup> Thus, as many critics perceived the television to be an *invasion*, a threat to the sanctity of the home and a flagrant assault on the conventions of middle-class domesticity, it makes sense that the device brought with it a revived interest, indeed an *urgency*, in the (re)definition and maintenance of the boundaries between “public” and “private” life. Lynn Spigel and others have suggested that these intense debates surrounding television’s role in the home at this time in fact have a historical grounding in discourses of domesticity that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century—when a new vision of the white middle-class home and the role of women within it took shape. The domestic ideology of this era imagined the home to be a private, utopian haven—an apolitical zone that was radically separate from the market and the state.<sup>57</sup> Stressing how politicians and public policies promoted the stability of the American family as a weapon against the dangers of the Cold War, Elaine Tyler May notes as well this reaffirmation of domesticity in the immediate postwar period, which relied on discrete gender roles, as well as a revitalization and overt moralizing of family life.<sup>58</sup>

Despite some fears that the TV would dismantle the “traditional” family—by distracting housewives from their domestic duties, by causing aggressiveness and insubordination in children, or by “softening” those men for whom rugged outdoor hobbies and activities were being replaced by passive indoor spectatorship as the leisure pursuit of choice—it was introduced and marketed as primarily a family medium. Its advertising and programming would both prescribe and display particular visions of domestic life. In looking at early representations of the domestic television

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<sup>56</sup> Susan J. Smith, *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home* (Burlington: Elsevier Science, 2012), 384.

<sup>57</sup> In her brief summary of the history of the home and family, Tamara Hareven reiterates the idea that the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American domestic ideal was intricately linked to the idealization of the home as a retreat from the outside world. “Ironically,” she states, “even though this concept of the ideal home was developed by urban reformers, moralists, and writers, it emphasized the pastoral ideal of rural society” (262).

<sup>58</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, xiv.

within the photographs and advertisements of popular periodicals and home magazines, Lynn Spigel shows the ways in which the image of the “family circle”—a visual trope first identified by Roland Marchand in his analysis of 1920s and 1930s advertising for household products—was deployed in order to frame the television as a natural extension of, and welcomed addition to, family spaces.<sup>59</sup> The advertisement below for a Motorola home television receiver (fig. 4.4) adopts this pictorial strategy. From a sofa in the left corner of the frame a young couple laughs as they watch the comedic performance that has been captured on the TV screen. Their two children sit on either side of them: on a stool to their left a young boy, midway through a snack, leans in towards the television, his face precariously close to the screen; on their right, or across from them in the “circle,” a younger girl, in pigtails and ruffles, sits contentedly on the carpeted floor as she reaches for a snack of her own. While the television is not literally in the center of the frame, it is indeed its central focus. Taking up the entire right third of the image and closing the “circle,” its place within the family unit unmistakable. Between this image and the ad copy below it is the line, in large bold print: “TV adds so much to family happiness”—the final phrase, *family happiness*, is underlined in red.

In the two 1950 advertisements for Dumont receivers (figs. 4.5 and 4.6), the contented family unit remains the primary message, while the actual product that is being sold barely makes the pictorial frame. The ad entitled “The greatest joys are shared,” commissioned by Norman Rockwell, for example, entails a large scale drawing of the captivated and eager faces of each

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<sup>59</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 40. In *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940*, Roland Marchand explains that in “[defining] the dominant fantasy of man’s domain in the world of work,” the “family circle” motif “expressed the special qualities of the domain that he shared with his wife and children at home.” He continues: “More than ever, the concept of the family circle, with its nuances of closure and intimate bonding, suggested a protective clustering—like the circling of the settlers’ wagons—in defense of qualities utterly distinct from those that prevailed outside” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 248.

member of a family of four—all looking at a television. The object itself isn't pictured: in the imaginary world of the advertisement, the TV would be located in the place of the reader/viewer. On the page, an actual television appears only as a tiny icon in the bottom right corner of—instead of being the primary focus, the emphasis is on the family itself, their union, and the event of watching television together.

The second Dumont advertisement, “Home Team,” maintains a similar tableau. Here, gathered around a television set, which, again, is beyond the horizon of the image, three generations closely watch a sporting event. This illustration is especially interesting for the way it might address and assuage those fears, detailed above, of television's potentially deleterious effects on gender arrangements within the home. While drawn into the televised game, the two women in this advertisement, for example, are clearly also engaged in some form of productive domestic labor. The wife, sitting cross-legged on the sofa, has a basket of yarn at her feet, and while her eyes may be on the football game, her hands are knitting away. The older woman in the rear of the image—who has almost been symbolically blocked by the outstretched arms of her husband the patriarch—dons an apron and continues to dry dishes as she checks in on the score. A boy crouches on the floor in a “hike” stance, dressed in full football gear. The boy's presence and posture ensures, perhaps, that instead of *replacing* his “manly” leisure pursuits and sporting activities, the television is in fact *inspiring* it. “There is great happiness in television,” proclaim both Dumont advertisements, “...great happiness in the home where the family is held together by this new common bond—television.” Depicted as a conduit to family happiness, these advertisements make the bold assertion that the family that watches TV together, stays together—a powerful

promise given the moment's renewed focus on the consolidation of the nuclear family, as well as the discourse around safeguarding the home and its members from dangerous outside forces.

Model 17K7—Big 17 in. screen...Mahogany or Lined Oak Cabinet.

## TV adds so much to family happiness

There's more fun in television than any other family-shared entertainment...comedy, music, sports, drama and educational shows everyone enjoys. Make sure your family gets all this TV fun on the set that brings you every show at its best—Motorola TV

**PHOTO-PERFECT PICTURES THAT COST YOU LESS**  
None—sit close up or far away and enjoy sharp, clear pictures—the product of Motorola's "years ahead" circuit design and advanced engineering features. There's a Motorola to fit your home and pocketbook—from budget-priced table models to luxurious TV-Radio-Phonograph combinations—all with the Motorola Built-in-Antenna. Compare—you'll agree—no other offers you so much quality at such low cost.

**✓ "GLARE-GUARD" SCREEN**  
The curved, anti-reflection TV screen that directs annoying reflections away—from your eyes, lets you enjoy your TV novel!

**✓ FASHION AWARD DESIGN**  
New beauty for your home, designed with the care given the finest furniture. Styles for modern and traditional settings.

**✓ CAMERA VIEW PICTURES**  
You see all of the picture just as the TV camera "sees" it. The rectangular, black tube means brighter, clearer pictures.

**✓ "MUSIC LOVER" SOUND**  
This new sound system brings you true pitch and tone in musical and voice reproduction in full range from bass to treble.

**✓ "DEPEND-A-BILT" CHASSIS**  
Factory-tested under extreme conditions to make sure that your Motorola TV will give you the longest, most reliable performance.

**✓ TWO SIMPLE CONTROLS**  
Quick, easy tuning without complicated dialing and adjustments. Just turn it on, then select your station... that's all!

you get all these features only in **Motorola TV**

SEE YOUR CLASSIFIED DIRECTORY FOR YOUR NEAREST MOTOROLA DEALER... specifications subject to change without notice

Fig. 4.4 "TV adds so much to family happiness," *Life Magazine* (1951). John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History. Duke University, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.



Aug. 1951

Harpers

Norman Rockwell

**The greatest joys are shared**

There is great happiness in television . . . great happiness in the home where hearts are lifted by sharing family pleasures. And for those who would know the fullest measure of television enjoyment, and see its stirring pageant in thrilling clarity, DuMont laboratories build television's finest instruments . . . the DuMont receivers. Everything a television set can be, everything it can offer, is yours in a DuMont. Consoles, combinations, table models.

*DuMont built the first commercial home television receiver—  
DuMont builds the finest.*

**DUMONT**

*First with the finest in Television*

Your DuMont dealer invites you to see the Morey Amsterdam Show, DuMont Television Network.

**THE HANOVER BY DU MONT,  
with 19-inch Life-Size tube.**

Copyright 1950, Allen S. DuMont Laboratories, Inc. • Television Receiver Division, East Paterson, N. J. and the DuMont Television Network • 515 Madison Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y.

Fig. 4.5 “The Greatest Joys are Shared,” Norman Rockwell, *Harpers Magazine* (1950).  
John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History  
Duke University, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Sept. 30, 1950



### Home Team

There is great happiness in television... great happiness in the home where the family is held together by this new common bond — television. And for those who would know the fullest measure of television enjoyment, and see its stirring pageant in thrilling clarity, Du Mont laboratories build television's finest instruments... the Du Mont receivers. Everything a television set can be, everything it can offer, is yours in a Du Mont. Console, combinations, table models.

*Du Mont built the first commercial home television receiver—  
Du Mont builds the finest.*



**DUMONT**

*First with the finest in Television*

THE TOWNSTOWN BY DUMONT, with  
17-inch Rectangular Life-Size tube.



Copyright, 1950, Allen B. Du Mont Laboratories, Inc. • Television Receiver Division, East Paterson, N. J. and the Du Mont Television Network • 515 Madison Avenue • New York 22, N. Y.

Fig. 4.6 "Home Team," *Saturday Evening Post* (September 30, 1950).  
John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History  
Duke University, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.



This vision of the good home life that the home television alleges to nurture in these advertisements relies on a precarious balance between privatization and the connection of the domestic with the public sphere. Further, “the ideology of privacy was not experienced simply as a retreat from the public sphere,” writes Lynn Spigel, “[but] it also gave people a sense of belonging to [a] community.”<sup>60</sup> National broadcasting, for example, linked the American public and the private lives of its citizens. In advertisements and live news coverage, but particularly in serial programming, television’s ability to enact a surrogate social life, was especially desirable for the large population of recently relocated suburban homeowners, for whom forms of neighborhood, community, and kinship ties that were well established, almost built in to urban life, were no longer tenable. Commercial television arrived in the American home at a moment when the newly isolated nuclear family and its concerns replaced previous ethnic, class, and political forces as the defining feature of individual identity and the locus of the private world.

Television provided its audience with an imagined community and collective life, however fictitious these networks may have been. In a way, for these new—and newly isolated—suburbanites, television *was* something like that “somewhere over the rainbow” about which Judy Garland croons in *The Wizard of Oz*—an escape from trouble or work or loneliness and isolation—with the crucial benefit of never having to leave the comfort of home or family behind in order to experience it. Perhaps Judy Garland’s anthem of the displaced, Salman Rushdie’s *hymn to elsewhere*, resounded as poignantly for audiences in 1939 as it did for those in 1956.

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<sup>60</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 100-101.



### **1956: A Television Event**

*The Wizard of Oz* made its television debut on November 3, 1956, during the final installment of the *Ford Star Jubilee*. It would be the first full-length film ever to be aired on commercial television. Sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, the *Jubilee* was a live, ninety-minute variety show that aired one Saturday a month on CBS. Aired only once a month, the format of such “spectaculars,” as NBC chief Pat Weaver labeled them, was intended to “challenge to robotry of habit-viewing,” and to reach “the total TV audience, not just a segment of it.” Beyond this, this new programming strategy pointed to early attempts on the part of major networks to establish the act of TV-watching as an “extraordinary national event delivered to the American home.”<sup>61</sup> On air for only a year, each episode was hosted by and/or featured well-known figures in the arts world such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Julie Andrews, Bing Crosby, Lauren Bacall and Nat “King” Cole. The beloved and not-yet-tragic Judy Garland, then thirty-three, headlined the series’ first show, which was the network’s first full-color live broadcast, and the episode was met with unprecedented ratings success. After Garland’s performance, CBS declared that their switchboards continued to flare even twenty-four hours after the broadcast, and they proclaimed that never before had they witnessed such an intimate response to any artist by the general public. For the series’ farewell episode, the live performance format was abandoned in favor of a special, two-hour airing of MGM’s 1939 Technicolor film “*The Wizard of Oz*.”

Bert Lahr, actor and comedian who played the cowardly lion in the 1939 film, and Liza Minnelli, the bright-faced ten-year-old daughter of America’s beloved Judy Garland, hosted the event. The program had mass cross-generational appeal. “*The Wizard of Oz*” would not only

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 85.

appeal to children, but the film maintained an element of nostalgia that likely attracted older audiences as well: Many older viewers would have surely read Baum's original series as children, while younger adults would remember its cinematic release in 1939 and the colossal marketing efforts surrounding it.<sup>62</sup> The fact that the Lahr and young Minnelli addressed viewers on live television, under the premise of having been invited into their homes to share in this special event, must have had a significant impact on the at-home audience. Memory scholar Marita Sturken contends, "When Americans watch events of 'national' importance on television, they perceive themselves to be part of a national audience regardless of their individual views or cultural background."<sup>63</sup> That night, more than a third of all households with a television—and half of the total television audience—tuned in to the most watched broadcast in history. From their living rooms, at 9PM EST, a large portion of the American viewing nation went to the movies—together.

But beyond the pleasures of imagined togetherness and collective national experience that this television special provided, and to which we will return, the immediate popularity of the 1939 film after its TV debut nearly two decades after its lackluster cinematic run, also speaks to the ways in which *The Wizard of Oz* fit well into ongoing dialogues in postwar American culture. The televised Oz renewed an already circulating discourse on conservative notions of domesticity and

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<sup>62</sup> Contributing to MGM's net loss was the massive pre-screening promotional campaign, which cost \$250,000. MGM ran full-page ads in the Sunday comic sections of newspapers to generate hype for the premiere. The Library of Congress's records indicate that by placing the advertisements for the film in an estimated twenty-nine newspapers in twenty-one large cities in August 1939, publicists reached an audience in the millions. Besides the massive the newspaper campaign, the company also had advertisements in large-circulation national magazines.

<sup>63</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories the Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13. In considering other national television events—from the assassination of John F. Kennedy Jr. to the first walk on the moon, from presidential inaugurations to the Superbowl—this first televised broadcast of a feature-length film, hosted live by contemporary Hollywood icons, figures as well as an instance in which viewers could interpolate themselves as participants in, and members of, a national culture.

home, and to the related urgency in demarcating a clear distinction between public and private space. With suburbanization, for example, and the emerging feelings of geographic and social isolation it brought for many, and with changes in gender roles and increased commodity production and consumer spending, the home and the nuclear family became, in George Lipsitz's words, "the site of all social demands, lauded all the more in theory as [their] traditional social function disappears in practice."<sup>64</sup>

It is interesting to return very briefly to the World's Fair, and in particular to the ways in which the short film, *The Middleton Family* was especially instructive and prophetic as "prototype of wartime and postwar entertainment."<sup>65</sup> In looking at the domestic scenes within this film, we saw above the ways in which its narrative preserves a corporate vision of the American future, while simultaneously promoting the ethic of the "typical" family as well as "typical" American consumer values—an underlying goal of the entire 1939 Fair. Both of these constructions—of the nation and the family, or the *national family*—correspond to what Lauren Berlant has called an "intimate public." A public is intimate, she writes, when it "foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness."<sup>66</sup> The television would appeal, too, to this longing for both intimacy and conventionality. But what is crucial about these imagined publics is that they are primarily *consumer blocs*, which "[claim] to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires."<sup>67</sup> Along with creating the notion of the "average" or ideal citizen at the New York World's Fair, the Fair also generated a

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<sup>64</sup> George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory," 92.

<sup>65</sup> William Bird, *Better Living*, 143.

<sup>66</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 5.

new vision of domesticity and consumption, whereby the sustained purchasing of new technologies and products would be the solution to the nation's troubles.

In an essay about 1950s ethnic working-class sitcoms, George Lipsitz explains how television during this time was “charged with special responsibilities for making new economic and social relations credible and legitimate to audiences haunted by ghosts from the past.”<sup>68</sup> Consider the audience(s) of the television debut of *The Wizard of Oz*. In depicting the world of the (relatively-recent) past, the film undoubtedly reminded viewers of the depression-era and wartime values—when scarcities of goods forced individuals to internalize frugality and self-denial. Aired during the monthly Ford Star Jubilee, the Oz narrative, familiar to many, new to some, was shot through with at least eight commercial breaks in which advertisements promoting “American” products encouraged consumers to exercise their rights, and perhaps even duties, as American citizens through consumption. Living the “American Dream” was not simply a way for Americans to justify their increased spending habits, it could also be understood as a civic duty that contributed to the overall health of the economy, and thus, the nation. In other words, promising not only the happiness and fulfillment of desire that steeps much of the language of advertising, the advertisements that intersected the film's narrative offered viewers yet another way to “become national,” to assert their allegiance to their family and their nation, and to cultivate a sense of national inclusion via commodity purchases.

At the end of Fleming's *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy finally gets her wish, realizing that she had the power to go home all along. Instead of feeling bad about the child's dreary lot in life—about the lifetime of labor, poverty, and neglect she would likely continue to face—audiences rejoice upon the girl's return to Kansas: feeling good about themselves, their country, its heartland, the moral

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<sup>68</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory,” 92.

fortitude and down-home values of Dorothy, America's "Every-girl" (the female version, perhaps, of Alfred Roberts, the "Typical Boy at the Fair.") In the end, it is the *family* that is reconfigured and reinvigorated, and since Oz is "only a dream" in the Hollywood version of Baum's original tale, the home and family is really *all there is*.



Figure 4.7: Screenshot from the 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*.

"And this is my room...and you're all here. And I'm not gonna leave here ever, ever again, because I love you all, and - oh, Auntie Em - there's no place like home!"

Therein lies one of the unresolvable ironies of the televised Oz. While the film is an unapologetic ode to the virtues of home and family, the "national event" was enabled by a medium whose entry into the American home significantly disrupted older patterns of family life. The home television, of course, is and always has been a commercial environment above all else. But, for audiences steeped in the dark memories of the 1930s, who still harbored residual anxiety about

consumer spending, the television would become the “primary instrument of legitimation for transformations in values initiated by the new economic imperatives of postwar America.”<sup>69</sup> This is in part what made the 1939 film, a massively sentimentalized version of Baum’s 1900 tale, an immediate television success in 1956. Along with the narrative itself, it was the *broadcast* of Oz that helped transform the text into an all-purpose solution to contemporary concerns about television and its impact on individual and family life.<sup>70</sup> The relationship between the text, its medium, and the cultural context in which it was aired was a dialectical one. The rhetoric of home that pervades Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz*—the same rhetoric that had 1939 critics bemoaning its overblown sentimentality—now worked (like a dream) to re-inscribe not just the home, but the people and commodities within it, as *sources of national virtue*.

On that November evening in 1956, as 45 million viewers tuned in to watch the story of Oz framed in the corner of their living rooms, Dorothy’s famous incantation resounded from television sets in living rooms across the country. *There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home, there’s no place like home*. And while the nation would sing along, together for the very first time, advertisers and corporate executives, then and now, would continue to rely on the believability of that phrase. Oz needed television as much as television needed Oz.

### ***The Continuing Impact of Oz***

*The Wizard of Oz* aired once again on CBS on December 13, at 6 pm EST, and this broadcast then became an annual network ritual. An article in *Time Magazine* in 1965 reiterates the eager anticipation surrounding the ceremonial television event:

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<sup>69</sup> Lipsitz, *Meaning of Memory*, 359.

<sup>70</sup> See Jim Groch, *Corporate Reading, Corporate Writing: MGM and CBS in the Land of Oz*, Dissertation, ProQuest UMI Dissertations Publishing (1996).

Parents are again preparing for the occasion. It will occur this coming Sunday for the seventh straight year, and the children, with a special restlessness, will collect around the television set in much the way that their fathers do for the professional football championships. The children know the names and styles of the players they are going to see, for the program has become a modern institution and a red-letter event in the calendar of childhood. It is the Oz Bowl game, CBS's annual telecast of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>71</sup>

If they hadn't already been before, soon after the first annual re-airing, the narrative and characters of Oz quickly became so recognizable that, as biographer Aljean Harmetz notes, they could serve as "shorthand in the marketplace."<sup>72</sup> Indeed, references to Dorothy, her friends, her journey, and her unshakable love of *home* and family, began appearing everywhere from car advertisements to record album covers to political cartoons. The annual ritual of watching became a mode of enacting a national community, whereby, through processes of repetition, identification, and commodification, the film began to stake its claim in American cultural memory, within what Lauren Berlant has called the "National Symbolic."<sup>73</sup> There are multiple factors—cultural, historical, social—that might help to account for Oz's pervasive and lasting impact as a narrative that continues to speak both for and about American identity.

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<sup>71</sup> "Television: The Oz Bowl Game," *Time Magazine*, January 15, 1965.

<sup>72</sup> Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz: Movie Magic and Studio Power in the Prime of MGM* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 291.

<sup>73</sup> In her analysis of national fantasy and how the landscape of national iconography is formed, Lauren Berlant traces the processes through which a common national character is produced. As she puts it, through the accident of birth within a particular set of geographical and political boundaries, the individual is transformed into the subject of a collectively held history and learns to value a particular set of symbols as intrinsic to the nation and its terrain. In this process, the nation's "traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals and narratives provide an alphabet for collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of national law, a birth-right." Through the mediated circulation of images and narratives and through references to symbolic monuments and sites, national culture comes to be collective, and rooted in the public forms of everyday life.

Its repeat telecasts, of course, have given a ritual quality to watching the film, making its consumption something of a national pastime. “We are ‘national,’” write Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny, “when we vote, watch the six o’clock news, follow the national sport, observe (while barely noticing) the repeated iconographies of landscape and history in TV commercials, we imbibe the *visual archive of reference and citation in the movies, and define the nation day by day in our policies.*”<sup>74</sup> Further, in its portrayal and representation of the past, of a pivotal (and indeed iconic) moment in American history, there may certainly be an element of nostalgia that continues to draw viewers to the film. This is especially apparent in its depiction of a familiar American landscape. Kansas, and more broadly the Midwest, is figured as the nation’s “heartland”—a symbolic repository of rural values, representing a world that is slowly receding or no longer within our grasp.<sup>75</sup> “The Kansas spirit,” wrote historian Carl Becker in 1910, “is the American spirit double distilled. It is a new grafted product of American individualism, American idealism, American intolerance. Kansas is America in microcosm.”<sup>76</sup> In his reading of Oz as a secular American myth, Paul Nathanson (1991) uses this idea to suggest that Oz has become another such symbolic landscape, evoking collective archetypal American landscapes such as the frontier, the wilderness and the metropolis. (Perhaps, by the time of its television premiere, the “family room” or “TV room” became another such symbolic landscape—giving another dimension to the film’s celebration of home.) Some scholars suggest that the trajectory of Oz—not only of its adaptations but of its re-viewing and re-releases—

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<sup>74</sup> Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny, *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>75</sup> On symbolic representations of the landscape in American art and literature, see Leo Marx’s foundational text, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>76</sup> Carl Becker, “Kansas,” in *Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner* ed. Guy Stanton Ford (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1910), 110.



traces key moments in the coalescing of national character: It is a “reference point” that compels us to return over and over again “to determine our national character and identity.”<sup>77</sup>

Still others have suggested that the familiar narrative reemerges in moments of cultural rupture, at historical moments in which the idea of *home*—the national or nuclear family—is under siege. We’ve seen, for example, how in 1956, the Oz story, now nearly two decades old, promoted a nostalgic attachment to home, family, and place at the very moment when forces such as media technology, heightened consumerism, and suburbanization were redefining and/or posing a threat to these “traditional” or normative cultural institutions. John Funchion, for example, is interested in the way U.S. policymakers, political scientists, and journalists continue to use references to Oz to justify the rationale behind multiple major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. “While turn of the century romances of U.S. imperialism have long since faded from popular memory,” he convincingly argues, “*The Wizard of Oz*’s persistence establishes that the U.S. can expand ceaselessly outward so long as the journey always remains homeward bound.”<sup>78</sup> The fact that the *Wizard of Oz* film, if not Baum’s original version, has secured its position as a permanent and ubiquitous fixture in contemporary Americana, makes a commonplace, which is to say it *normalizes* and ostensibly makes a civic *obligation* of this desire to attain, return to, or identify with this mythic space and idea of home. On the other hand, the need to *rewrite* and *revise* this exclusive conception of a unified “national” character or the normative (white, heterosexual, middle-class) home, while still relying on the narrative structure and conventions of Baum’s original story, is apparent in many remakes and sequels.

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Nathanson, *Over the Rainbow*, 116, 122.

<sup>78</sup> John Funchion, “When Dorothy Became History: L. Frank Baum’s Enduring Fantasy of Cosmopolitan Nostalgia,” *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol. 71, No. 4 (2010): 429.

## Conclusion:

Oz came swimming to us out of history, because we needed it, because it needed to be. A book, a film, a television ritual, a thousand icons scattered through advertising, journalism, political cartoons, music, poetry. Had Oz been blocked, it would have taken another form in the world. It could have come as a cyclone.

-Geoff Ryman, *Was: A Novel*

Forty years after the New York World's Fair, Flushing Meadows Park, the stage set on which "The World of Tomorrow" was revealed to the nation in 1939, would also provide the backdrop of urban decay that frames "Munchkinland" in Sydney Lumet's 1978 film adaptation of the 1975 Broadway musical "The Wiz." This historical coincidence not only cements the connection between the two events with which this chapter begins, but it also enables a further analysis of particular modes of Oz adaptation. The proliferation of countless prequels, sequels, and remakes of the Oz narrative in United States cultural productions, of which "The Wiz" is emblematic, points as well to a certain sense of *non-resolution* within the original(s). It indicates a widely-felt desire, perhaps even a *need*, to challenge the dominant myths of *home* to which the Oz stories—both the originals and the bulk of its adaptations—continue to gesture. Indeed, the discourses of home and family that provided the cultural context for the "Oz revival"—a revival enabled by the expert marketing of the television as a "domestic" medium—projects an image and narrative of home that relies on uninterrogated assumptions about class, gender, race, and sexuality.

"The Wiz" (1978) is an example of an Oz remake that challenges the unmarked whiteness of the ideals of home and family that are presented in both Baum and Fleming's narrative. Though the film was a critical and commercial disappointment, the Broadway musical on which it was based was wildly successful. As a Newsweek reporter stated of the production: "American blacks

have been moving down a yellow brick road (badly in need of repair) for a long time, looking for Oz or the Emerald City or some other dream deferred, so the idea of an all-black version of The Wizard of Oz makes perfect sense.” Emerging out of the Blaxploitation frenzy within 1970s cinema, in the filmic adaptation of “The Wiz,” director Sydney Lumet relocates the Kansas family farm to urban Harlem in the wake of the post-Civil Rights era and convergent feminist movements. With the spectacular backdrop of Manhattan and many of its iconic sites and structures, The Oz of this film depicts many of the issues afflicting 1970s urban African American communities: from segregation and decay to crime, abandoned buildings, gangs, drugs, prostitution, and even unfair labor practices.

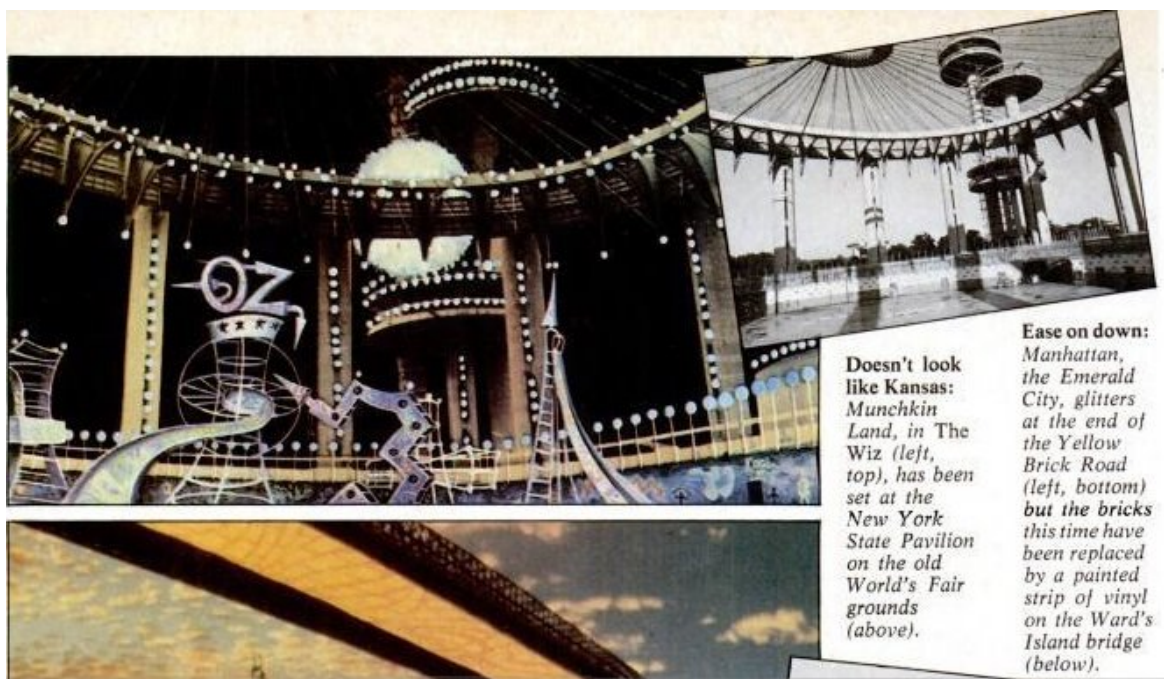


Fig. 4.8 “The Wiz,” *New York Magazine*, October 16, 1978.

At the film’s start, Dorothy, an introverted 24-year-old kindergarten teacher, is busy in the kitchen of the Harlem apartment that she shares with her parental figures, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. She is helping to prepare a feast for her large extended family that is gathering today to

celebrate the birth of her cousin's new baby. As she follows her Aunt to the door to retrieve the coats of her guests, Aunt Em introduces her to a young man, a potential suitor, but Dorothy sheepishly turns away and returns to the kitchen as the rowdy family reunion rages in the adjacent room. As visitors gush and coo at the newborn infant, Dorothy stands back, fidgets, and averts her eyes. If her perceived lack of "maternal instinct" is at all in question, the film's first musical number in the very next scene solidifies its absence. With all of the adults seated around the table, Aunt Em, the hearty mother figure, sings "(Don't Lose) The Feeling That We Have"—an ode to the enduring love of family which is directed mainly at the young mother who is beginning her new life away from home. Dorothy is the only one at the table who is not singing along and she is visibly unmoved. Ashamed at her own lack of affect, she leaves the table mid-song. Back in the kitchen, she launches her own forlorn musical response with the song "Can I Go On?," in which she wonders how she could lose something she never had to begin with. "Lose it?" she sings, "I don't even know the first thing about what they're feeling." Thus, it is very early made clear that for Lumet's Dorothy, who is significantly older than both Baum's and MGM's, a primary source of inner conflict is her ambivalence about conforming to the ideological construction of black female—and these insecurities drive her visit to Oz. Nonetheless, Dorothy does *desire* to have these "feelings," and she believes that she might be capable of learning them. At the end of the musical number, for example, the insulated Dorothy, who has admittedly "never been south of 125<sup>th</sup> Street," wonders, "If I dare to take a chance / Would someone lead me?"

Despite Dorothy's plea for clarity and guidance in these opening scenes, once the story transitions to the urban Oz, it becomes a narrative of the self-actualization and salvation of black men rather than one of Dorothy's liberation. The three familiar Oz characters remain in "The Wiz,"

though each one exaggerates, embodies, and caricatures particular historically located racially-based stereotypes of African-American men: The Scarecrow, played by a 19-year-old Michael Jackson, is intellectually inferior, since the taunting crows surrounding him forbid him to read from the pages of literature and poetry with which his insides are stuffed; the Tin Man is unemployed and hypersexual, as the viewer soon learns that he and his domineering “fourth wife,” Teenie, were fired from their Coney Island jobs; and the gay-coded Cowardly Lion is an effeminate mess, kicked out of the jungle because he refused to enact the kind of authority required of a king.

These characterizations, along with the fact that each of these male figures are in some way broken, incomplete, and *stuck* (quite literally in the case of the impaled Scarecrow and rusty Tin Man), echoes a rhetoric that pervaded 1960s and 1970s public and social discourse (epitomized by the notorious Moynihan Report of 1965)<sup>79</sup> which lamented a “crisis in masculinity” within the black community—a crisis that Moynihan, for example, attributed to the “pathology” and “deterioration” of the matriarchal Black family. Although, in “The Wiz,” it is Dorothy that ultimately *enables* the three main figures to restore their troubled manhood, in the end, while they are all stationed in new positions of power throughout Oz (which is also the case in the 1939 film), the young woman must return home, just as powerless as she always was—still circumscribed to the domestic sphere, just a bit more willing to accept it.

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<sup>79</sup> In *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (1965), Moynihan writes: “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time. (...) In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.” For a detailed analysis of the film’s characters and how they speak back to Moynihan, see Jesse Scott, “The Black Interior: Reparations on African American Masculinity in *The Wiz*” in *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs, and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity* ed. Elwood Watson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009).

The film's promotion of "proper" femininity, and specifically of *motherhood*, is hammered home in a bizarre scene near the film's end, in which Glinda the Good Witch miraculously appears in the sky. Singing a reprise of the song "Believe In Yourself," she has come to lead Dorothy back home after the three male characters have recovered their power and manhood. As the figure moves closer and closer to the screen, she is surrounded by gentle snowflakes as well as, strangely, a multitude African-American babies, suspended in mid air, coming into a tighter focus as they move towards to Dorothy.



Fig. 4.9 Screen shot, "The Wiz," 1978.

Released at the height of 1970s Black Pride movements, "The Wiz" is viewed by some critics—even despite its abysmal reviews—as an attempt to turn Dorothy into a symbol of proud black womanhood. Writes scholar Carly Orshan, for example, "[Dorothy's] newfound independence reflected the liberation that many black men and women felt during that time (...) The Wiz's

Dorothy is specifically encouraged to venture beyond the domestic boundaries, both figuratively and literally, established by home and family in order to find her autonomy as a young black woman in America.”<sup>80</sup> I disagree with this characterization, as it seems that this objective—to turn Dorothy into an autonomous woman—is subsumed under the imperative of reinforcing an allegedly threatened black masculinity. Dorothy is “successful” only insofar as she rescues, or even *mothers*, each of the film’s central male characters. The real success of her journey through Oz is gauged by her ultimate decision to return home and, presumably, to start a family. In other words, while Lumet’s “The Wiz” addresses and problematizes the implicit whiteness in Baum and MGM’s conception of home, nation, and family, it is unable to do this without marginalizing black women and re-inscribing the hetero-nuclear divisions on which the very mythologies of “home” that the film is meant to challenge, relies.

Canadian writer Geoff Ryman’s postmodern novel *Was* (1992), to which I will return in this project’s conclusion, also works to retell the story of Oz by troubling the heteronormativity of home in both Baum’s and MGM’s Oz.<sup>81</sup> Ryman’s novel traces the narratives of three historically overlapping characters: the “real” Dorothy Gael, an orphan in 1890s Kansas who is sexually abused by her Uncle Henry and whose sexual and emotional abuse led Frank Baum to write his legendary novel, *The Wizard of Oz*; Frances Gumm, the 1930s child star who would eventually become the star of MGM’s *Wizard of Oz*, by then having adopted the stage name Judy Garland; and Jonathan, a gay Canadian-born actor who is dying of AIDS in Los Angeles in 1989. In the novel, it is the 1956 television premiere of *The Wizard of Oz* on CBS that connects the lives and

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<sup>80</sup> Carly A. Orshan, “An American Tale: Incarnations of the Wizard of Oz and the Negotiation of Identity, Race, and Gender, in Popular Culture” (2012). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> I would like to thank June Howard for suggesting Geoff Ryman’s novel to me in 2009; it has been instrumental in shaping this project.

stories of these figures at a single moment. The stories of each of these characters work to shatter and de-sentimentalize myths of “home.” Instead of existing as a site of childhood innocence, home is instead, for each of these figures, a site of violent trauma, rejection, compulsory silences, historical erasures and disappearances. For each of these marginalized subjects, the imaginary landscape of Oz becomes a necessary fiction; it is a fantasy, Ryman’s novel suggests, that individual and national bodies must construct in order to be able to survive in and makes sense of the present.

To move from this landscape of fantasy to a real physical and historical landscape, I will return finally to Flushing Meadow Park, the site of the 1939 World’s Fair. While the site still exists as one of New York City’s protected public spaces, any traces of 1939’s World of Tomorrow are conspicuously absent from the landscape. Within the park, as one commentator has noted, there “lies a stillness, the void of long-demolished buildings and long-broken promises and dreams.”<sup>82</sup> When asked about his favorite place in all of New York City, Josef, a fictional protagonist in Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), asserts that it is in Queens. “Only it isn’t there anymore, my favorite place,” he says. “They closed it. Packed it up and rolled it right out of town.”<sup>83</sup> In both fictional and nonfictional accounts of the Fair, the detailed and intensely melancholy recollections evoked by this particular national event is striking.

Although there have surely been other, bigger, equally or more spectacular World’s Fairs, many writers and scholars have noted that none seem to be recalled with such nostalgic rigor—an interesting fact given the Fair’s explicit devotion to depicting and forecasting the world of the future. “Despite its financial difficulties and the gloom brought on by the war in Europe,” notes

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<sup>82</sup> Kenneth C. Spence, “Lamenting the Late Trylon and Perisphere,” *Film Comment* 20, No. 2 (1984): 68-77.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2000 and 2012), 374.



World's Fairs scholar Robert Rydell, "The New York World's Fair has become, over the years, the most nostalgically remembered American Exposition."<sup>84</sup> This nostalgia, the desire to imaginatively revisit the site of the Fair, is indexed in part by a flourishing of cultural products dedicated precisely to this mission: Works of historical fiction, such as E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair* (1985), David Gellertner's *Lost World of the Fair* (1996), and James Mauro's *Twilight at the World of Tomorrow* (2010), have constructed entire narratives around the event, while popular novels like Michael Chabon's above-mentioned *Kavalier and Clay* (2000) devote intense detail to their characters' nostalgic recollections of the Fair. What is more, physical memorabilia from the 1939 World's Fair is a veritable industry in and of itself: On eBay, for example, there is an entire category devoted to the auctioning of Fair artifacts from souvenir teaspoons and snow globes to ticket stubs, comic books, and the coveted blue and white "I have seen the future" pin that fairgoers received immediately following their visit to Ford Motors' "Futurama" exhibit. This cultural desire to reconstruct and recreate the experience of the Fair—through narrative, videos, and souvenirs—also served as the impetus of the documentary with which this chapter begins—Lance Bird and Tom Johnson's 1984 *The World of Tomorrow*.

In a post-interview, *The World of Tomorrow's* narrator, Jason Robards, recalls his visit to the Fair when he was just ten years old. "I think it must have stayed with every child who saw it," he says. "Every child, who, grown up now, seeing home movies or finding in a drawer a blue and white button or souvenir postcard, wishes, just for a moment, that he could go back to the future—

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 96.

to that “World of Tomorrow” now contained forever in a lost American yesterday.”<sup>85</sup> Robards’ recollection, here, gives us a clue into this paradoxical nostalgia surrounding the Fair. For some of the same reasons we continue to revisit Oz over and over in American popular culture, the nostalgia that surrounds the 1939 New York World’s Fair in public memory indexes a longing for the “alternate vision(s) of America”<sup>86</sup> that both Oz and the Fair provided, albeit temporarily. To obsessively revisit and re-narrate these sites is to enact an imaginary return to a Flushing Meadows Park *before* the Trylon and Perisphere—erected as symbols of both peace and technological progress—were torn down so that the 4000 tons of steel they encased could be used to manufacture war weapons. It is to return to an Oz in which the great Wizard has not yet been revealed as an aged Omaha-expat, powerless behind a green curtain. It is the desire to return to an idea of “home” that is always already a fantasy.

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<sup>85</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *World’s Fair* (New York: Vintage, 1985); David Gelernter *1939: The Lost World of the Fair* (New York: Free Press, 1996); John Corry, “Remembering the ’39 World’s Fair,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1984.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, 122.

## CHAPTER 5

### “A Country’s Attic:” The Story of Stuff at the National Building Museum’s 2012 *House & Home* Exhibition

The history of American houses shows how Americans have tried to embody social issues in domestic architecture, and how they have tried, at the same time, to use this imagery to escape a social reality that is always more complex and diverse than the symbols constructed to capture it.

-Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream*

The household is, in itself, the condensed history of a nation’s past, the center of its present, and the cradle of its future.

-A.E. Kelly “Electricity in the Household,” *Scribner’s* (January 1890)

On April 28, 2012, The National Building Museum in Washington D.C. presented to the public a long-term exhibition entitled *House & Home*, which was designed by the largest museum exhibition design firm in the world, the prestigious New York-based Ralph Applebaum Associates. Covering four hundred years of American architecture, technology, real estate, and home-making practices, the exhibition aspires to “tell a full range of stories about the history of the American home.”<sup>1</sup> While this is surely an ambitious mission, the critical importance of addressing and unpacking these ideas on a national stage is poignantly—perhaps even fatefully—embedded in the

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<sup>1</sup> See entire exhibition description at <http://www.nbm.org/exhibitions-collections/exhibitions/house-and-home.html>

particular *timing* of a national exhibition that aims to “challenge our ideas of what it means to be at home in America,” as the show’s promotional literature explains. For although the idea and original plan for *House & Home* have been in the works since 1997, the exhibition did not launch until 2012, after over a decade of stops and starts, and at a moment in which the country was half a decade into a massive economic crisis wherein issues of housing and the American home were at the very center.

On the first page of a 2011 prospectus for the *House & Home* exhibition is a quotation from architect Robert A.M. Stern, taken from a 1985 *New York Times* article in which he is discusses the intimate relationship between an architect and his or her client. “When you’re talking about building a house,” Stern explains, “you’re talking about building dreams.” This statement is provocative in that it merges the very terms that are often used to *separate* house and home in popular thought: shelter and dwelling; materiality and metaphor; real and ideal.<sup>1</sup> Whether romantic or vulgar (perhaps it is both), Stern’s assertion exemplifies the frequent ontological slippage—between structure and sentiment—which so easily seeps into discussions of house and home.

As Stern knows well, the American house is more than a physical structure or technological solution. It is an important cultural artifact, ideological construction, and symbol, which on its own carries a strong emotional charge. As a physical embodiment of deeply held ideals, contained within the symbol of the *house* are a host of assumptions and cultural narratives: narratives about morality, self-reliance, nature, class aspirations, to name just a few. At least in part, the “dream” that is summoned in Stern’s comment is a formulation of the “American Dream”—the

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<sup>1</sup> The full quotation, from a 1985 *New York Times* article: “The dialogue between client and architect is about as intimate as any conversation you can have, because when you’re talking about building a house, you’re talking about building dreams.”

achievement of which, since at least the nineteenth century, has become coterminous with the idea of home/property ownership as the foundation for ideal citizenship.<sup>2</sup> To emphasize this enduring link between the set of beliefs and virtues identified with the “American Dream” and the values attributed to owned private property, for example, consider, for example Walt Whitman’s assertion in a New York newspaper piece in 1856: “It is in some sense true,” he wrote, “that a man is not a whole and complete man unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on.”<sup>3</sup>

Home, of course, is a powerful term with a host of often competing or contradictory meanings, values, and associations attached to it. This multivalent discourse of “home” can reveal both the sacralization of owned private property as the ultimate expression of liberty in American culture as well as the historical exclusions—based on gender, race, sexuality, and class—that have been both legitimated and concealed within the ideologies of domesticity and national belonging. Legal scholar Lorna Fox has pointed out that one way to think about home would be “to consider the equation home = house + x; or, by separating the idea of home into, on the one hand, the physical structure of the house and on the other, the ‘x factor.’”<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, and this project at

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<sup>2</sup> This republican ideal is rooted in Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian philosophy in which he envisions the independent farmer/property owner as the ideal citizen. In Jefferson’s model, this distinctively “American” figure would be economically independent, industrious and virtuous, and politically invested in the nation’s future. On the transformation of this mythic figure into an American symbol, literary scholar Henry Nash Smith writes in *Virgin Land* (1950): “The Western yeoman had to work as hard as a common laborer or a European peasant, and at the same tasks. Despite the settled belief of Americans to the contrary, his economic status was not necessarily higher. But he was a different creature altogether because he had become the hero of a myth, of the myth of mid-nineteenth-century America.”

<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman, “Wicked Architecture,” in *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters*, ed. Emroy Holloway (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1938), 607. In the Introduction to a 1991 volume of *Social Research* dedicated to scholarly examinations of “home,” Stanley Cavell reflects on the philosophical preoccupation with home in the American nineteenth century, exhorting us to “think of Thoreau’s *Walden* on the topic of the building of the house, and its idea, shared with Emerson, that owning or belonging to a place is the promise and power of leaving it, say of staking one’s name,” *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> “The Meaning of Home: A Chimerical Concept or a Legal Challenge?” *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Dec, 2002): 580-610.

large, I argue that the distinction is far more complicated, since the house also suffers from this semantic excess. Nonetheless, I agree with Fox that unraveling this “x factor,” which “represents the social psychological, and cultural values which a physical structure acquires as a home” is an important conceptual and critical challenge.

Considering this cultural and semantic excess within the ideas of both house and home, and looking especially at the use of domestic objects in the context of modern museum display, this chapter is devoted to an in-depth analysis of two specific sections within the *House & Home* exhibition at the National Building Museum in Washington DC. The first is entitled “Living at Home,” and the second, “Home Economics.” On display in the exhibition’s “Living at Home” selection are nearly two hundred domestic objects that range widely in origin, function, historical period, and value. Discussions and debates about the collection and display of objects within the institutional context of the museum have a long intellectual history, dating from the emergence of the public museum in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Europe.<sup>5</sup> Since its origin, the museum, as a public or national institution, has been invested in a “democratic” use of objects, displayed on the basis of epistemological categories in order to instill civic virtues via civic rituals. However, as many scholars have detailed at length, these “virtues” were frequently laden with assumptions based on dominant race- and class-based ideologies.<sup>6</sup> Keeping these analytical frameworks in mind, in closely examining responses to the National Building Museum’s “Living at

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<sup>5</sup> As museum scholar Andrea Witcomb points out, each major intellectual and critical movement in the humanities has offered a critique of museums and their use of objects. In principle, all of these arguments suggest that the classification practices of the museum enterprise work to “erase the meanings objects had in the social world which made and used them, and provide them with an alternative set of meanings which implicate them not only within a capitalist commodity system but also within bourgeois, patriarchal systems of cultural value” (“On the Side of the Object: An Alternative Approach to Debates About Ideas, Objects, and Museums.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 16, no. 4 (1997): 383-99).

<sup>6</sup> Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Home” display, I am also interested in how this collection of domestic objects is simultaneously celebrated and derided in the public and national press for its powerful claims to “sentiment” and “nostalgia.”

Further, I am concerned with the way this immediate recognition seems to overwhelm the critical power of the objects themselves. In this discussion, I will rely on literary historian June Howard’s reflections on the social construction of emotion and sentimentality, wherein she discusses in particular the ways in which the appearance of the term [sentimentality] marks a site where values are contested. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the term “sentimental” so frequently emerges in response to the exhibition’s representations of domestic space. I hope to show that the kind of analytical stopping short that appears in many public reviews of *House & Home* is linked to the following two interrelated factors: (1) the objects’ location within the “private” domestic interior (*the home*) and (2) the powerful emotional responses that popular images or representations of home frequently evoke in consumers. I then look at this installation in tandem with another, much smaller, section within *House & Home*, entitled “Home Economics,” which consists of a historical timeline detailing the history of housing and homeownership in the United States.

While the timeline is clear and meticulously detailed, “Home Economics” is arguably the section that demands the most from the museum visitor. Located in the fourth of the exhibit’s five rooms, the timeline is preceded by five gallery installations that are primarily graphic, object-based, and/or interactive: the visual splendor of photographic collages in the first room; the scale models of architectural masterpieces and iconic American homes in the second room; the bodily and sensory experience of the “Please Touch” house construction section; the cross-generational heap

of household objects on the opposite wall; and the beautiful panoramic short films in the third room. A concern, then, is that many visitors will not graft the important information onto the images of house and home that they have thus far consumed throughout the exhibition. *House & Home* curator Sarah Leavitt also acknowledges that for many reasons—including age level, time restrictions, or the format of large group tours—the timeline is the gallery most likely to be skipped over. Nonetheless, she explains, “People like knowing it’s there.” I argue that a central value of the historical timeline is its capacity to confront the “sentimental” impact of the exhibition’s previous installations (and to help viewers consider the dominant narratives at play in the creation and reproduction of nostalgia). However, because this gallery seems to have less visual or “emotional” appeal than the others within *House & Home*, this self-reflexive gesture, which is vital to what I see as the transformative potential of the exhibition, may be largely missed.

My overall argument in this chapter, however, does not *condemn* affective registers such as nostalgia or sentimentality, nor does it warn against the use of objects in museums’ depictions of cultural and historical processes. Rather, it shows how the National Building Museum’s 2012 *House & Home* exhibition provides a unique avenue for understanding how the ubiquity of home—including the visual and sentimental clichés that infuse twentieth- and twenty-first century American discourse and cultural products—works to obscure the social relations and political negotiations that *produce* this space, along with the insistent and insatiable desire to attain or achieve it. I end this discussion with a brief reflection on how such institutions, as instruments of historical discourse, might think about recognizing the ways in which they embody and produce, intentionally or not, particular emotional responses in their audiences, and how effects/affects such as nostalgia and sentimentality—pathologized as feminine and commonly scorned as



backward-looking, static, or regressive—might instead be engaged in reflexive, generative, or progressive ways. Most broadly, in looking closely at these installations

### *The National Building Museum and the Representation of House and Home*

This dissertation has thus far examined the ways in which ideas of house and home are narrated and represented in various media avenues—literature, film, television, advertising; this chapter considers the contemporary *museum* to be a logical extension of this list. As museum scholar Roger Silverstone notes, museums, like other communications media, “entertain and inform; they tell stories and construct arguments; they aim to please and to educate.” The National Building Museum, for example, recognizing its role as a knowledge-generating instructional site, states as its mission the imperative to help the public make more “informed and enlightened choices in determining the built environment of the future.”<sup>7</sup> Silverstone continues: “[Museums] define, consciously or unconsciously (...) an agenda, they translate the otherwise unfamiliar and inaccessible into the familiar and accessible. And in the construction of their texts, their displays, their technologies, they offer an ideologically inflected account of the world.”<sup>8</sup> Further (as with World’s Fairs, or literary canons, or national television broadcasts, to extract several key sites from my eclectic archive,) museums shape and (re)affirm ideas of community and nation.

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<sup>7</sup> From National Building Museum, Annual Report; October 1, 1992 to September 30, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Silverstone, “The Medium is the Museum: On Objects and Logics in Times and Spaces,” in *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives* ed. Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 161-176. On the new role of museum as mass media, see also Andres Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).



Fig 5.1 The National Building Museum with the U.S. Capitol Building in the background. Photograph by F.T. Eyre.



Fig 5.2: National Building Museum Interior. The Corinthian Columns in the Great Hall. Photograph by Hoachlander Davis Photography.

Located in the nation's capital, The National Building Museum's implication in this process is doubly evident. Designed in 1882 by General Montgomery Meigs, the building that now houses The National Building Museum was home to the U.S. Department of the Interior's Pension Bureau from 1885 until 1926. The structure is a striking work of public architecture, with its deep red brick palazzo-style exterior and a dramatic interior atrium that has been the site of numerous presidential inaugural balls. A historic monument in its own right, standing just four blocks from the National Mall, the museum is thus itself a "biographical object of the nation."<sup>9</sup> As such, its location in Washington D.C. also makes it a compelling site from which to explore American notions of home—as architecture and idea, process and image. For like the idea of *home* itself, the city of Washington is also a powerful cultural symbol of identification as well as an actual lived place.

As detailed above, Robert Stern's comment—"when you're talking about building a house, you're talking about building dreams"—clearly demonstrates the cultural and symbolic power not only of ideas of *home*, but also of the physical *house* in the national imagination. The layout of the House & Home exhibition expresses the greater ambiguity and meanings of these categories. The distinction between the concepts of house and home is in fact the organizing motif of its first two rooms. The design of this introductory gallery, for example, the first of the exhibition's five rooms/sections, deliberately reinforces the basic conceptual distinctions between ideas of house and home: Building versus dwelling; shelter versus nest; materiality versus experience. On the walls of this gallery is a collection of photographic images gathered from numerous sources such as the

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<sup>9</sup> Malen Mouliou and Despina Kalessopoulou, "Emblematic museum objects of national significance," in *The Thing About Museums: Objects and Experience, Representation and Contestation* ed. Dudley, Barnes, Binnie, Petrov and Walklate (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 47.

American Memory Association, historical societies, the Historic American Buildings Survey, and the online photograph-sharing site, Flickr.

The wall to the viewer's immediate right, entitled "House," is an orderly, though not chronological, grid that gives a broad survey of American residential architecture spanning four hundred years. The survey is extensive, moving beyond the single-family detached dwelling to include apartment buildings, military barracks, slave quarters, penitentiaries, as well as iconic mansions; the viewer moves quickly from Graceland to Brooklyn housing projects, for example, from a Chinatown YMCA in Philadelphia to an Alabama fishing house. Then, in contrast to this precise grid-like placement of "house" images, the photographs displayed on the wall entitled "Home" are multi-dimensional and overlapping, like a page from a scrapbook or family photo album. Exploring each room of the house, these images focus on how individuals and families live *inside* the home, although layout expresses the greater ambiguity and messiness of the category. An image from 1906, for example, depicts a young boy's birthday party: a dozen children are lined up against the ornately papered wall of a late-Victorian parlor room, keeping still for a group photograph. Another posed portrait, an image from W.E.B. Du Bois' collection that was assembled for the 1900 Paris Exhibition, shows a nine-member African-American family on their Atlanta porch.<sup>10</sup> From President Richard Nixon's family dinner in White House dining room to a living room full of green jerseys and junk food as an ecstatic group of Green Bay Packers fans witness the winning touchdown of the 2011 Super Bowl, this second photographic collage aims to offer a more intimate look at the lives and everyday dramas that unfold inside the American home.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (2004) Shawn Michelle Smith writes extensively on these portraits to show how images of the family and domestic space have been used at particular historical moments to naturalize and reproduce gender, race, and class hierarchies.





Fig 5.3 Introductory Gallery of *House & Home* Exhibit, © 2012 National Building Museum.

“House” Wall



Fig. 5.4 Trainwreck Houseboat, Sausalito CA  
Photo © Andrew Garn

“Home” Wall



Fig. 5.5 Julia Brooks' Wedding, Washington D.C., 1947.  
Photo © Addison N. Scurlock; Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

This embodied distinction between ideas of house and home also informs the second room of the exhibition, which is the centerpiece and core experience of the exhibition. In keeping with the spatial division between (building a) house and (making a) home, exterior and interior, spanning the left wall of the room—the section labeled “House”—is a full-scale “please-touch” demonstration of the evolution of housing design and construction techniques. This section is labeled “House.” Moving chronologically, this historical survey of building techniques and materials is designed to show “the ways people have built houses have varied according to local environmental conditions and the availability of labor and materials.” The five life-size wall sections look at construction materials and construction techniques from Adobe style—a technique used for “hundreds, if not thousands, of years” in the region of the Southwest that is now New Mexico—to twenty-first century “Green Building,” a technique which embraces the early twenty-first century emphasis on building sustainably, using local or pre-assembled materials that consider climate and setting, and reducing environmental impact.

Then, on the opposite wall, labeled “Home,” is the eclectic array of nearly two hundred domestic objects that will serve as the focus of this chapter. As the museum-goer makes her way down the wall of objects, the display seems to be moving further and further into levels of privacy and intimacy—progressing, for example, from the lawn and garage, through the kitchen, dining, and living rooms, and finally to the bathroom and bedroom.<sup>11</sup> Taken as a whole, the function of

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<sup>11</sup> Adding to the interactive dimension of the exhibit, evenly spaced along this procession are six short films, commissioned by New York-based filmmaker Local Projects, which use stop animation graphics and historical photographs in order to help contextualize the changing design and customs surrounding the American home. Focusing on the everyday activities that transpire in domestic space, each film has a particular theme: domestic bibles and prescriptive literature; food preparation and dining; holidays and rituals; entertainment; work; and personal and domestic hygiene.

the “Living at Home” object wall is to highlight the changing nature of the home across space and time, and to suggest the multiple roles that objects play in defining and documenting these shifts.



Fig. 5.6: Room Two of House & Home: “House” wall section (left); Scale Models of Iconic American Homes (center); “Home” Section (right). 2012 NBM, Photo by Allan Sprecher.

Despite the fact that curators have taken special care to spatially separate house and home within these first two exhibition sections, I want to show that when taken as a whole, the multiple galleries within the exhibition, while acknowledging this separation, in many ways also reveals their *inseparability* of ideas of house and home in contemporary discourse and thought. To do this, I will now turn to a closer reading of the objects within the “Living at Home” installation.



## Part I. Sentimental Objects: “Living at Home” and the Politics of Display

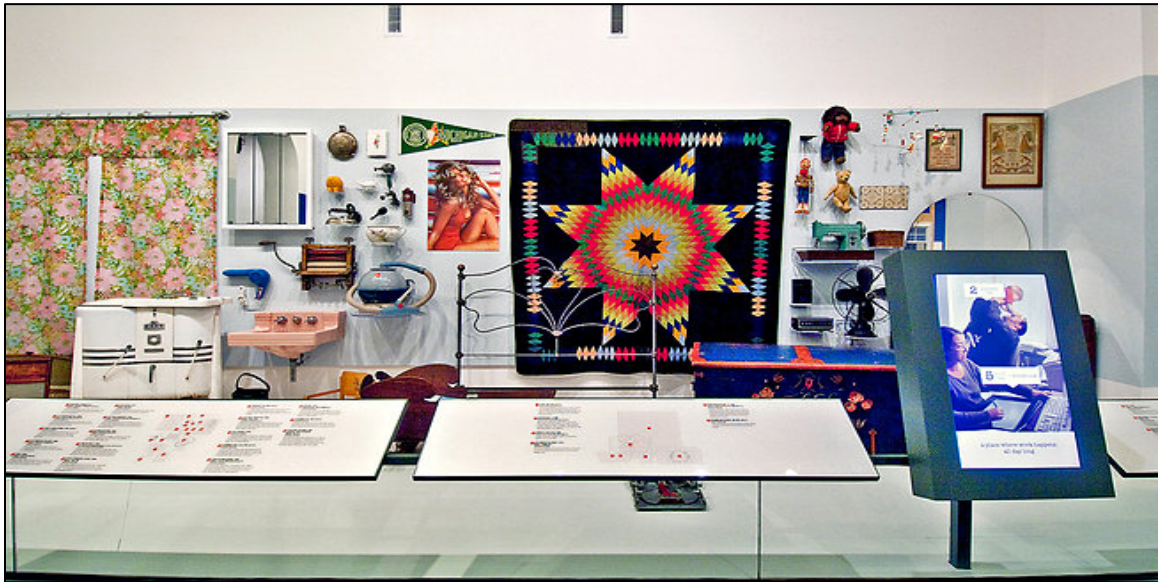


Fig 5.7: Photograph by Lee Stalworth/Fine Art Through Photography, LLC.  
© 2012 National Building Museum

All we can do is to trace our own images of the world as we have inscribed them on the walls—as stuffed ducks and quilted barns. To the extent that the world is experienced as a succession of completed material substances—the full maturity of the process of mystifying social relations as things—we lose access to the sight of historical forces and cultural construction.

-Kathleen Stewart, “Nostalgia—A Polemic”

The covered wagon of the pioneers morphed into orange U-Haul trailers.  
U-haul.com, “Our History”

Spanning a large white wall in the second, and largest, room of The National Building Museum’s *House & Home* exhibition is an eclectic floor-to-ceiling assortment of nearly two hundred household objects. From a wooden spinning wheel to a stack of Tupperware containers in the not-quite-neon colors of the 1970s, the items in this collection range widely in origin, function, historical period, and value. While steeped in the unique process of selecting, obtaining, and eventually displaying these objects, *House & Home* curator Sarah Leavitt, author of *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (2002), sometimes referred to the



project as “America’s U-haul.” And although this moniker was given at least partially in jest, I find the metaphor to be valuable not only for thinking about the diverse assortment of domestic goods, but it is also an instructive image with which to think about the *House & Home* exhibition writ large.

Because of the cross-class and cross-generational appeal of the household ephemera on the “home” wall of the second gallery, and perhaps simply because of the sheer quantity and mass of *stuff*, this display has been vividly described in the public press as reminiscent of something “pulled directly from a garage sale.”<sup>12</sup> It is like “rooting around in a family member’s basement,” hails *Washingtonian*. For Penelope Green of *The New York Times*, the gallery’s “huge collection of American stuff,” seems to offer a glimpse into “a country’s attic.”<sup>13</sup> Beyond these “homey”<sup>14</sup> associations, I find Leavitt’s *U-haul* to be an especially poignant way to describe the *affective* dimension of the exhibit, particularly because of its association with the deeply ambivalent experience of relocating, or moving house.

Throughout the process of moving, for example, firmly established systems of household order and spatial-orientation are indefinitely broken down, disassembled. Likewise, for some, moving also threatens secure notions of self and identity. Whether traumatic or joyous, it is a process whereby all of the objects we have amassed over time, the memories inscribed in them, along with the sheer disorder of it all seem to fold in on each other. “[Moving],” writes Jean-Sebasti n Marcoux (2001), “proceeds from the need to face *every single object*, from the first baby hair lock to those things that are rediscovered, those that had been lost, forgotten, or that one

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<sup>12</sup> Rachael Bade, “National Building Museum Exhibit Hits Close to Home,” *Washington Diplomat*, July 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Penelope Green, “A Country’s Attic, On Display,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Marsha Dubrow. “Housing Exhibit Mixes Homey with History at the National Building Museum,” *The Examiner*, April 27, 2012.

would have preferred to forget.” The process of moving, he suggests, demands that we “go into the details, to the *heart of things*” (my emphases).<sup>15</sup> Beyond the passive and perhaps pleasurable or bittersweet process of reminiscing, this imperative—to face at once all of the memories and relations embedded within the material culture of the home—can actually be quite jarring. Indeed, moving can be so traumatic, as some oft-cited statistics suggest, that the process ranks third on a list of life’s most stressful events, preceded only by death and divorce.<sup>16</sup>

Marcoux’s object-based meditation on moving is drawn from Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on collecting and the collector, and specifically framed around his short essay entitled “Unpacking My Library,” wherein objects serve simultaneously as vehicles of memory and material “evidence” of personal history as well as larger historical processes. Jean Baudrillard has similarly demonstrated the value that personal collections have in the formation of subjectivity, and its potential to give the illusion of individual control over time and space in the world.<sup>17</sup> From within this logic, a further analogy can be made between the relationship of individuals to their own collections and the relationship of society to the museum collection. From within the context of *House & Home*, a national museum exhibition dedicated to the “American home,” the image of “America’s U-haul” can help us to imagine this material clutter not only in the context of the individual household, but in the context of the U.S. nation-state as well. As I will discuss further below, scholarly criticism of the museum-as-institution, both in the United States and abroad, have

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Sebasti n Marcoux, “The Refurbishment of Memory” in Daniel Miller, *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 78.

<sup>16</sup> Statistic from Employee Relocation Council.

<sup>17</sup> Of the personal collection, Baudrillard writes: “Here we confront the very discourse of subjectivity, of which objects represent one of the most privileged registers—interposing, in that space between the irreversible flux of existence and our own selves, a screen that is discontinuous, classifiable, reversible, as repetitive as one could wish, a fringe of the world that remains docile in our physical or mental grip, and thus wards off all anxiety.” See Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 7-24.

discussed and debated at length the ways in which these institutions both create and confirm ideas of national identity by deliberately choosing which narratives and histories to foreground.<sup>18</sup> From within the framework of America's U-haul, visitors of *House & Home* might view the curated objects as representing the detritus as well as the material treasures of a mythic, somehow unified, national family. I use the problematic idea of "family" intentionally here, whether the term depicts the individual household or the national body defined through U.S. citizenship. For, like "home," ideas of "family" are also powerful constructs that have been used to determine which individuals and groups come to be included, protected, and celebrated within the discourses of domesticity, race, and nation.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as each of these discourses are created and challenged within the context of the museum, they also converge in critical analyses of the role of objects, and the institutional, pedagogical and aesthetic choices that are made regarding their collection, classification, and display.

"Museums invariably base their enterprise on a certain notion of objects and a system for classifying them," write Daniel Sherman, and "classification functions through the imposition of order and meaning on objects and through the positing of objects as triggers of ideas." Even

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<sup>18</sup> See Eileen Cooper-Greenhill, *Museum, Media, Message* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); and *Objects of Knowledge* (London: Athlone Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Anne McClintock, for example, in considering the invented constructions of both family and nation, explains the importance of the *family* trope in national narratives. She offers the following explanation of its two primary functions of this trope: First, "the family offers a 'natural' figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests. Second, it offers a 'natural trope for figuring historical *time*.'" To illustrate how these processes are played out, she offers the example, popularized in Britain once Social Darwinist theories had become widely adopted, of the evolutionary [white] Family of Man. The "family," became a salient metaphor by which to historicize and naturalize social hierarchies and distinctions. Emerging from this narrative and process, however, is an essential paradox: "The family as a metaphor offered a single genesis narrative or national history, while, at the same time, the family as an institution became voided of history. As the nineteenth century drew on, the family as an institution was figured as existing, by natural decree, beyond the commodity market, beyond politics, and beyond history proper" ("Family Feuds," 63-64).

though the institutional goal of museums is to present this classification as if it were intrinsic within the displayed objects themselves, this act always takes place, as Daniel Sherman explains, “within some externally constructed discursive field, such as the “nation,” the local “community,” “culture” as opposed to some aspect of the “natural world,” a historical “époque” or “period,” or the categories of “artistic school” or “style.”<sup>20</sup> Sherman’s attention here to the processes of categorization and classification takes a cue from intellectual debates that approach the museum as an institution of state power.

This kind of theoretical critique is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, primarily within his work on the museum as “heterotopia” in his essay “Of Other Spaces” (detailed in Chapter Three), on systems of classification in *The Order of Things* (1977), and also in his critique of disciplinary technologies and the relationship between space and power in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). For Foucault, the museum is a physical monument to the drive—born of the Enlightenment principles of order, rationality, and progress—to collect, classify, and order the world into a total and universally intelligible system. Australian cultural critic Tony Bennett (2004) refers to this drive as indexing an emerging “exhibitionary complex”—a term he uses to describe the emergence of World’s Fairs, department stores, and museums in nineteenth-century Europe and North America—which constructed public spaces and modes of classification that helped the masses become “a voluntary, self-regulating citizenry.”<sup>21</sup> From within this framework, the practice of collecting and displaying objects has deep political implications as a function of capitalism and imperialism. The discourses created from within the context of museum display and through their seemingly natural systems of classification—the narratives of progress, of culture, of the

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Sherman, “Introduction,” *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Irit Rogoff and Daniel Sherman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xi.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 73.

communities and values that the objects and collections signify—are given an air of authority and legitimacy through their institutionalization. By actively choosing which objects, cultures, and histories to foreground, national museums therefore not only create these discourses, but also construct individuals and publics that consume them. As such, Susan Stewart, and numerous scholars since, has critiqued the museum as a knowledge-generating site on account of its attempt at “comprehensive collecting as a form of domination.”<sup>22</sup>

While it may be impossible even for the contemporary museum to altogether avoid the construction of a particular narrative or narratives within an exhibition, in terms of the use and display of objects, this storytelling capacity of the exhibition is complicated even further.<sup>23</sup> The first of these complications, as Roger Silverstone explains, “lies in the recognition that the meaning of an object, its communication, does not stop with its display, nor is it determined either by its place in the display or the description offered of it in the adjoining label. The meaning of an object continues in the imaginative work of the visitor who brings to it his or her own agenda, experiences and feelings.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Susan Crane wonders if “the memories associated through objects to form meaningful narratives do not in effect prevent other memories from being

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<sup>22</sup> For notable work on the ways in which Western hegemony is inherent in the American museum, and particularly in the practices of exhibition and display, see also Mieke Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 556-594. On the relationship between domination and collection, or collecting as domination, see: Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1984); Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989); and Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992). For further examples of this kind of Foucaudian analysis of the museum, see, for example, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill “The Museum in the Disciplinary Society” in *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, ed. Susan Pearce (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 61-72, as well as Roger Miles and Laura Zavala *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> On museums and narrativity, or the textual or semiotic approach to “reading” museums, see Mieke Bal *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996) and Andrea Witcomb, *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 128-165.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Silverstone, *Towards the Museum of the Future*, 164.

associated with individual objects, stifling the multiple possible meanings of any single object, perceived subjectively.”<sup>25</sup> Keeping these critiques in mind, I would like to consider how the object installation at the National Building Museum addresses and pushes against some of these museal and curatorial challenges.

In my discussions with the National Building Museum’s curatorial team, I learned that in the process of organizing and assembling the extensive display of domestic objects for the *House & Home* exhibit, the curators were especially careful not to impose onto the items either a chronological frame or a hierarchy of value. In providing just very basic context, the curators have ensured that the task of assigning meaning and narrative to the pieces is left largely to the individual viewer. Indeed, the installation moves indiscriminately from kitsch to luxury items—a plastic pink flamingo lawn ornament, for example, is featured with no less ceremony than an authentic Tiffany lamp or an early-eighteenth century handmade silver teapot. Both of these details are key, and they differentiate the National Building Museum from traditional curatorial practices in several ways: First, this exhibition practice aims to derail any easy assumptions on the part of the museum audience about the *value* of any single object—*i.e.* use value, exchange value, aesthetic value, sentimental value, as well the objects’ new value as an artifact within the context of museum display, that is, removed from everyday use and now sacralized.

Further, the textual descriptions that accompany each object provide only very basic information about the object: its essential function; the period in which it was manufactured; and where or from whom it was acquired. Of a ceramic beer stein, for example, viewers learn only that it was produced in the 1970s and obtained from the collection of Hank and Karen Griffith. “Covered to deter insects,” the description reads, “beer steins kept the beverage cold.” While these

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Crane, *Museums and Memory*, 4.

brief textual descriptions do index the historical use and significance of certain items, the installation as a whole actually circumvents the notion of a singular historical context for the displayed objects. Providing only this very basic context ensures that the task of assigning meaning and narrative to the pieces is left largely to the individual viewer. At the same time, though, it is perhaps *because* of the way it easily invites personalization and identification that multiple reviewers of *House & Home* have focused primarily on the emotional response that the collection of household artifacts evokes. It is “feel-good fare” that “inevitably touches the pleasure-buttons of nostalgia.”<sup>26</sup>

This type of response is not surprising, since this emotional association was written into the project. A 2008 prospectus for *House & Home*, for example, proposes, “People seeing the objects are flooded with associations, memories, and emotions as they see a spinning wheel, a piano, a combination radio-television-record player, and an easy bake oven.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, For *Washington Diplomat* writer Rachael Bade, the wall of objects performed just this function: it was “the best part of *House & Home*,” she explains, just before indulging a few of her own private memories:

A squishy beanbag chair reminded me of the hot pink one I used to sink into as a child watching “Fox and the Hound,” “Alice in Wonderland” or one of the dozens of Disney movies that lined our shelves. A Lincoln Logs set from the 1950s took me back to trips to our grandparents’ house, where we’d play with Dad’s old toys and ancient stuffed animals, some with an eye missing – objects Grandma obviously didn’t have the heart to pitch (...) One butterfly chair sent me daydreaming about college, where I carried around a fuzzy, bright orange butterfly chair that I swore helped me to study.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Kennicott, *The Washington Post*, “Exhibit Review: *House & Home* at the National Building Museum,” April 30, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> National Building Museum, Exhibition Prospectus. November 18, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Rachael Bade, “National Building Museum Hits Close to Home” *Washington Diplomat*, July 2012.

As museum guests respond to the display of furniture and household items in this gallery, it is interesting to watch their reactions—which almost always involves the relaying of some memory or association to whomever is accompanying them whether children, students, or friends. Even though this type of response was somewhat anticipated, it is striking how frequently writers, reviewers, and scholars, in their discussion of the gallery, lapse into their own accounts of individual/personal memories associated with the objects—regardless of the forum or audience: even in Laura Burd Schiavo’s recent review in the scholarly *Journal of American History* (2012) she writes: “My own memory of [a 1950s collapsible television tray table] is unrelated to television or the 1950s; in the 1970s my grandmother served hors d’oeuvres in her New York apartment on her lightweight, easily stored TV tables.”<sup>29</sup> Obviously, the idea that objects can be imbued with a host of meanings and personal memories is not new or groundbreaking. Regardless of, and often far outweighing, their market value, these emotional associations are what give objects their “sentimental value.” Whether or not they may question the “authenticity” of those emotions that are allegedly summoned by sentimental texts or gestures, “One can respectably admit,” writes June Howard, that an object is treasured because it reflexively provokes memory and emotion.”<sup>30</sup>

In an early evaluation of *House & Home* in *The Atlantic*, Emily Badger comments on what might be called the *feeling* of the exhibition. “The interiors of our homes have changed with time as much as the exteriors have,” she writes. “The [National Building Museum’s] depiction of what we do *inside these private places* is *sentimental and random and amusing*,” while “the *meatier stuff* – the history of the modern American mortgage – is also on display” (my emphases).<sup>31</sup> This description

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<sup>29</sup> Laura Burd Schiavo, Exhibit Review, *The Journal of American History* (December 2012): 853.

<sup>30</sup> June Howard, *Publishing the Family* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 218.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Badger, “The Evolution of the American Dream, from Colonial Times to Today,” *The Atlantic*, April 30, 2012.



of the museum's depiction of the domestic interior and its objects but enduring ideas within contemporary cultural thought: they are assumptions that relate in particular to intersecting discourses of gender, affect, and space. The first of these is that emotions themselves are uncritical, with particularly strong emotion being irrational. Such reasoning, as Doreen Massey (1994) outlines, relies on gender-coded dichotomies on which the idea of Western knowledge production has been based. On one side we find "History, Progress, Civilization, Science, Politics and Reason, portentous things with gravitas and capital letters," Massey writes. On the other, "...stasis, reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, aesthetics, the body."<sup>32</sup> It is easy to see how Badger's description of the object wall as "sentimental" and the historical timeline as "meaty" fits neatly within this typology. In responding to this sentimental/meaty opposition, it is not my intention to level a critique of sentiment/sentimentality as a form, a gesture, a rhetorical mode, or a positive or negative characteristic of or response to representations of home, or any kind of cultural product, for that matter.<sup>33</sup> Instead I would like to revisit the question posed by literary historian June Howard in her influential essay in *American Literary History* (1999): *What are we doing when we call something sentimental?* In "What is Sentimentality," and in her book *Publishing the Family* (2001), Howard challenges the commonly held notion that there is a real distinction between

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<sup>32</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 257. In *Publishing the Family*, June Howard's explains how the particularly feminine association of "sentimentality" was a phenomenon that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, when it became imbricated with the term "domesticity." (230-241).

<sup>33</sup> As indexed in this project's introductory chapter, there is a large body of literature on sentimentality, particularly within American literary history. Along with June Howard's *Publishing the Family* (2001), see for example, Ann Douglas *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Jane Tompkins *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Richard Brodhead *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Laura Wexler, "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform" (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992); Lauren Berlant *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Shirley Samuels ed. *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

“manipulated sentiment” and “genuine emotion.”<sup>34</sup> “True” feeling, according to this formulation, is largely involuntary; it is far more reflexive, and it emerges from deep within the individual psyche. Sentiment, on the other hand, is a reaction that is *externally imposed*: it is a performance, perhaps, of how one *should* feel in a particular cultural setting.<sup>35</sup> Howard offers the following concise response to the inquiry posed in the essay’s title: “When we call an artifact or gesture sentimental,” she explains, “we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible.” In other words, “‘sentiment’ and its derivatives *indicate a moment when emotion is recognized as socially constructed.*”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, although our affective states and emotions are socially constructed, the fact that they are experienced on a deeply personal and embodied level can conceal the workings of power by obscuring its very operations.

With this in mind, then, in the context of the of *House & Home* exhibition’s strong claim to sentiment: If sentiment itself “indicates a moment when emotion is recognized as socially constructed,” as Howard explains, doesn’t the very “recognition” that there is a “discursive process” at play here—one which has so successfully scripted emotional responses to images of home—indicate that there is something more at stake to this “feel-good” display, or that something more is taking place on the part of the viewer? The connection between affect, objects, and the home, here, is that each can be read as a manifestation and mobilization of institutional power, though the illusion of the “private” and subjective nature of their emergence works to effectively mask their external or collective character.

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<sup>34</sup> June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” *American Literary History*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (1999): 63.

<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the derision of sentimentality seems somewhat akin to Milan Kundera’s depiction of *kitsch* as something that “requires the abdication of critical judgment because it tells us what to think and feel.”

<sup>36</sup> June Howard, “What is Sentimentality,” 66.

In labeling the experience of the wall of domestic objects as primarily and finitely a “sentimental” one, museumgoers might miss an opportunity to fully engage with the multiple narratives and histories of the actual objects on display. In other words, both within and beyond the *House & Home* exhibition, whether objects are either celebrated or overlooked on account of their “sentimental value”—the label seems to overwhelm or redirect critical readings of the objects themselves.

Objects tell stories, of course, but they can also be powerful signifiers and materializations of social codes. Of the power of *House & Home*’s objects to openly signify for viewers, for example, Sarah Leavitt remarks of the curatorial process:

[The project] raised all sorts of questions for our curatorial team: how would these ordinary objects tell the stories we needed them to tell? What is a Slinky, after all, without stairs? What would visitors make of a wooden contraption if they did not know the purpose of a yarn swift? While visitors might expect to see the Atari game console, would they be as familiar with Cold War survival crackers? It’s been a long time since an American kitchen regularly featured a butter churn, and what of the sprinkler in the shape of a duck? Would that tell its story about back yards and children and hot summer days at home? Or would it falter next to the silver mezuzah, with its incantation of doorways and sacred household space? With this display, we were faced with nothing less than illustrating the elusive, esoteric, and multifaceted ways that houses become homes. We needed to display things that would explain ideas.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, there are many stories and contexts that make up the social biographies of these objects, but to see the “ideas in things,” it is crucial that museumgoers do not end their engagement with the items by simply personalizing them, or by recognizing their claim to sentimentality. (“Visitors will enjoy pointing out familiar objects,” one review states, “but then what?”)<sup>38</sup> However, from

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Leavitt, “What Makes a House a Home,” Guest Feature in American Institute of Architects (AIA), Dallas Chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Amanda Kolson Hurley, “Review: Domestic Dissonance,” *The Architect’s Newspaper*, May 29, 2012. The review continues: “This reviewer’s associative powers are not strong enough to form a meaningful

within the context of museum display, these objects—wrested from everyday use and, in effect, “killed” or “divested of hardened and fossilized meanings and all the accretions of capitalist exchange<sup>39</sup>—carry an entirely new power. In this way, as the following section will explain, The National Building Museum’s installation opens up possibilities for thinking about these objects in a way that my other resources or cultural texts could not.

### *The New Power of Domestic Objects in the Context of the Museum*

My readings of domestic material culture in previous chapters closely considers the cultural and highly gendered idea(l) of creating and maintaining a strict separation between public and private spaces at various historical moments throughout the twentieth century. Through these readings we have seen that this division itself is deeply unstable. This recognition—which by now is a commonplace in feminist analysis even though it tends to disappear in everyday practice and political discourse—challenges two core principles of industrial capitalism: the “physical separation of household space from public space and the economic separation of the domestic economy from the political economy.”<sup>40</sup> Reading the material culture of home in this way is an important critical endeavor as it disrupts many of the distinctions that continue to be mapped onto domestic space where the interior, coded as feminine and private, is considered a site of stasis and tradition, and exterior, “public” space—space *outside* of the home—is figured as a masculine site of progress, politics, and change. In other words, such readings help to underscore the “meaty” versus

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connection between a Crock Pot and the Glass House, a model airplane and Mount Vernon ...A lot of care went into the details of *House & Home*, which makes its conceptual shagginess more disappointing.”

<sup>39</sup> In “On the Side of the Object,” Andrea Witcomb writes: “Demythified, stripped of its affirmative character, the museum object would thus become a critical object, re-viewed allegorically through the museum’s specific frame of reference” (168).

<sup>40</sup> Delores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 3.

“sentimental” dilemma highlighted above. But, in necessarily placing my objects in specific textual and historical contexts—the commodity in the turn-of-the-century novel, the souvenir in the bourgeois domestic interior, lighting technology in early-twentieth century advertising, the television in the postwar home—these types of analyses animate only certain facets of the “social life of things.”<sup>41</sup>

Among the nearly two hundred objects on display in *House & Home*'s wall of objects, are many of the objects I have discussed at length in previous chapters of this dissertation. On a detached mantle in the living room section of the exhibit, for example, is a porcelain princess figurine in that I imagine to be quite similar to the one that L. Frank Baum's fictional Dorothy encountered in “The Dainty China Kingdom,” as highlighted in Chapter One. In the “dining” section of the *House & Home* object wall, viewers will find a 1940s electric chandelier (a centerpiece of Chapter Two) suspended over a chrome table, and close by in the living area there is also a Maxfield Parrish print (an iconic piece, entitled “Daybreak”) on the wall. Nearby, an authentic 1898 Tiffany's lamp is perched atop a mid-century entertainment center and television console—the historical and material signposts of Chapter Three. I single out and closely read these items in order to show that the stories embedded *within* these *things*—the ways they were used, the attitudes surrounding their presence in the home—make these familiar objects rich critical resources for understanding not only shifting attitudes towards domestic space, but also for understanding the inseparability of ideas of the private home from “public” discourses of gender, race, and class, and the nation.

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<sup>41</sup> Arjun Appadurai *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Recall the moment in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), for example, in which Dorothy wishes to transport a porcelain doll from Oz back to Kansas so that she can display it on the mantelpiece. At the turn of the century, a privileged activity of middle-class women was the purchase and display of domestic objects that would elevate or confirm their social status and that of their families. The mantle, in this case, is the site of this performance of white middle-class ideals of domesticity. Alone, the idea of organizing domestic goods so as to display class affiliation or aspiration troubles the idea of the home as a strictly private space, but the consumption and display of this type of souvenir in particular, or of goods purchased from "exotic" or foreign territory, also indexes the transnational networks that are staged and enacted within the confines of "private" interior space, particularly during this time of overseas expansion and U.S. global empire.<sup>42</sup> Chapter Two, focusing on both the electric chandelier and the lamp in the turn-of-the-century urban hotel, showed that beyond being a powerful class symbol, the ornate, feminine, or Orientalist styles of domestic lighting fixtures at this moment were designed in part to evoke a connection with a mythic past and to camouflage the products' mechanical mechanisms. This aesthetic aimed to assuage public anxieties surrounding widespread electrification, and rapid industrial change in general, which was quickly becoming a part of everyday American life. The signature jewel-toned stained glass of a Tiffany's lamp, for example, worked to soften the harsh glare of the incandescent bulbs, and the detailed floral organic designs would evoke nature, a mythic past, rather than modern technology, which for many was otherwise perceived to be dangerous, threatening, or alienating. The electric chandelier, suggesting permanence and a long-established genteel tradition, epitomized this trend of disguising modern technology in traditional

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter One, also see Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

historic décor. On a fundamental level, the domestication of electricity reveals the co-extensiveness rather than discrete division of public and private zones as the electrified house is literally connected to a vast grid of electric power. Further, electricity itself, like any other consumer product, is a profitable extension of the market economy.<sup>43</sup> We might similarly consider the central commodity discussed in Chapter Three—the television console on which the Tiffany’s lamp is displayed in the National Building Museum’s exhibition. As both a piece of furniture and an electronic media device, the domestic television, like the radio before it, opens conversations not only about class, style and domestic decoration, but also, as a communication medium, it exemplifies the ways in which home and family life are integrated into national and political discourses as well as the global marketplace. In effect, I revisit some of the previous chapters’ material culture readings here in order to show that *because* of the very organization (or non-organization) of these objects, a museal practice that is in absolute contrast to the more traditional “period room” or glass-case approaches on which many traditional art or history museums still rely, there is a wider range of possibilities for reading the objects themselves as well as the history of the domestic interior.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Delores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 75.

<sup>44</sup> In museum studies, there remains intense discussion and debate about the uses and effects of period rooms: See for example Special Issue of *Visual Resources*, “The Period Room Debate and the Making of America’s Public Art Museum” ed. Sally Anne Duncan, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2005); and Julius Bryant, “Museum Period Rooms for the Twenty-First Century: Salvaging Ambition,” in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (March 2009): 73-84.



Fig. 5.8 Installation images showing *House & Home*'s display of 200 household objects.  
© 2012 National Building Museum, Photo by Allan Sprecher.

### Object Stills From *House & Home* Collection



Fig. 5.9a Fiestaware pitcher, 1950s-60s; Big Ben alarm clock, 1920s; Tupperware snack cups, 1970s; camera, 1940s (Howard County Historical Society, Ellicott City, MD); meat grinder, 1940s; Royal Doulton figurine, 1962 (private collection).



Fig. 5.9b Toothbrush holder, 1970s; Hamburglar juice glass, 1980s; Macintosh computer monitor, 1987-1990; candlestick telephone, 1920s; cheese grater, 2007.





**Fig. 5.9c:** Iron, 1930s; fondue set, 1970s; cocktail glass, 1950s; thermostat, 1920s; pap feeder, 1880s.



**Fig. 5.9d:** Cookie jar, 1980s (C.W. Rynd); table fan, 1920; candle snuffer and wick trimmer, early 19th century (Howard County Historical Society, Ellicott City, MD); clock radio, 1980s; croquet ball, 1980s (Montgomery County Historical Society, MD).



**Fig. 5.9e:** Waring blender, 1947; milk bottle, mid-20th century; sewing machine, late 19th century; butter mold, 1920s.



**Fig. 5.9f:** Kitchen timer, 1990s (Sally D. Liff); whale oil lamp, c. 1810s; teddy bear, 1930s (Cynthia Field); Slinky, 1960s.

In recognizing, but refusing to privilege, the context of an object's origin, this jumbling of artifacts works to enable a more nuanced understanding of the way certain objects have passed through their original cultural context. The viewer's direct encounter with the objects may open up an understanding of how some of these items, once markers of immigrant traditions, for example, have become appropriated or Americanized—such as the bamboo mat (1990s); chopsticks (2000); or the piñata (2007). In addition, what was once an object of utility or necessity, may now function as a nostalgic relic, a historical artifact, or as aesthetic display within the home. Consider, for example, the nineteenth-century butter churn located in the kitchen area, or the early-twentieth

century washboard that hangs on the wall in the section alluding to the bathroom and laundry room. Though the accompanying texts inform viewers that both were nineteenth-century tools, and that pounding butter and laundering were labor-intensive and gendered domestic chores, we might just as well imagine both as relics or antiques that could be on display in any number of homes throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. In my childhood home, for example, my own mother (see, *I can't help personalizing the collection's narrative either*) had a collection of washboards on the kitchen wall, along with a large wicker paddle that was once used to beat the dust out of rugs and carpets.

As another example of such historically malleable readings, The Wallace Nutting print, *Maple Sugar Cupboard* (1912), which viewers learn was “part of the Colonial Revival decorating craze,” might demand a consideration of why nostalgic depictions of the colonial past were especially popular with the American middle-class during the early twentieth-century? With photographs that romanticized New England interiors from the American colonial era, Nutting's images promoted a return to “simpler times”—a seemingly innocuous desire that in reality smacked of racist and exclusionary national sentiments.<sup>45</sup> Colonial Revival, like the Arts and Crafts movement before it, was in part an aesthetic response to what many perceived as the social ills that “plagued” a rapidly urbanizing nation. Calling for a distinctly “national” style, Colonial Revival lauded ethnic purity at a time of mass immigration, and national boundary setting in the face of

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<sup>45</sup> For an extensive description of the ways in which these New England artists and images produce this kind of national nostalgia, see William Truettner and Roger Stein *Picturing Old New England: Image and Memory* (Washington, D.C. and New Haven: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and Yale University Press, 1999).

ever expanding transnational connections.<sup>46</sup> The home is both the subject and the site of these representations and transformations.

Similar possible readings of individual objects at the National Building Museum abound. As an example, consider the slow cooker (1970s) which, according to the object's accompanying placard, "appeals to busy families by heating dinner in an empty kitchen while everybody is at work and school," has recently undergone a revival in part due to the Slow Foods movement. In this context, the meaning of and values associated with the object have completely shifted: rather than a tool for working families in a hurry, the slow cooker now represents for many the time and delicate care that went into the food itself—focusing on the attributes of the food—its local sourcing and flavor—rather than the mode of its preparation. It is thus viewed as an antidote to the impersonal idea of "fast food" rather than as a time saving device.

Similarly we might consider the nineteenth-century quilt, on loan from the Daughter's of the American Revolution Museum, which is affixed to the display wall between a Farrah Fawcett poster and a Howdy Doody doll. Of the quilt, the informational placard states that that "Piecing together bed-coverings from scraps of cloth has long been both necessity and art form. Quilt patterns have varied by region and ethnic group, and often commemorated marriages, births, and other life-cycle events." With only these basic contextual details, viewers are free to engage this piece from multiple perspectives: Just as it may register as a treasured heirloom or gift, passed down for generations, it may also signal the resurgence of interest in traditional domestic crafts. Writing on the recent popularity of knitting, for example, Wendy Parkins shows that this popularity can be seen as "a reaction against the speed and dislocation of global postmodernity, part

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<sup>46</sup> Kristen Hoganson, *Consumer's Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 40.

of an attempt to live differently at a different temporality, and to find meaning and identity in the practices of everyday life.”<sup>47</sup> As with the resurgence, indeed the movement, of slow cooking, this re-embracing of domestic hobbyism may index the desire to create a “temporal niche” for a “slower mindful use” of domestic time. With their “connotations of pre-industrial domesticity,” those crafts that are wildly popular in contemporary U.S. subcultures such as knitting, quilting, slow foods, pickling, home-brewing, etc. “may seem to reinforce women’s locatedness in the private sphere of the home, [but their] resignification as leisure [rather than work] may provide an effective means of being in, but not of the domestic.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the resurfacing of these crafts have been positioned as subversive or radical, as critiques of consumer culture, and this idea of “new traditionalism” is a cornerstone of the contemporary American subcultural scene (even though the idea of “reclaiming domestic time,” and, more importantly, having the ability and resources to do so, is in large part a class- and race-based privilege).

Each of the domestic objects on display at the National Building Museum have many stories to tell; and they are stories that go beyond nostalgia and beyond consumerism, although these are both crucial dimensions of the history of the home. The seeming disorder of the domestic items and the productive complication of ideas of period, function, and value shows us not only how the interior *space* of the American home has changed over time, but it opens up and makes accessible a whole history of how shifting social codes and public discourses of exclusion and access, get conferred not only onto these spaces but also onto the objects within it.

Both of these characteristics of *House & Home*’s “Living at Home” gallery—its transposal of ideas of value and its de-emphasis on historical context—work in part to address and challenge

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<sup>47</sup> Wendy Parkins, “Celebrity Knitting and the Temporality of Postmodernity,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2004): 426.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 433.

institutional critiques of the museum and curatorial practices and to invite a more active form of interpretation. In *On Longing* (1984) Susan Stewart writes: “When objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, serving to subsume the environment to a scenario of the personal.” She continues, “...the further an object is removed from use value, the more abstract it becomes and the more multivocal is its referentiality.”<sup>49</sup> If the museum (perhaps much like the home itself) traditionally “seeks to articulate a coherent cultural response to the fragmenting and challenging conditions of modernity by arranging objects so that they tell coherent stories about time and space,” the collection of objects within *House & Home* seeks to open up imaginative and multiple possibilities of meaning by troubling such coherent, singular, or chronological narratives.<sup>50</sup>

However, in the case of this installation at the National Building Museum, these same organizational techniques that aim to democratize the exhibition’s narrative and experience by enabling the objects to freely signify for individual museum visitors—a “shift in curatorial voice”<sup>51</sup>—are also precisely the factors that led above reviewers to comment on the experience of this gallery as a distinctively “sentimental” or nostalgic one. In other words, despite this exhibit’s progressive representational approach, does *affect* itself (the appeal of “sentimental” reflection) overwhelm this effort? More specifically, does the wall of objects, despite its *potential* to open new dialogues and spaces of inquiry about the history of the American home, still work (like the very critiques of the museum and the politics of display that it is deliberately and self-consciously attempting to

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 163-64.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Hetherington, “Museum,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 2-3 (2006): 602.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Crang and Divya Tolia Kelly, “Nations, Race and Affect: Senses and Sensibilities at National Heritage Sites,” *Environment and Planning* Vol. 42, No. 10 (2010): 2321.

overwrite) to “erase history” and to “[promote] social cohesion,” but only among a particular audience—those who find their own values and aspirations reflected in the imaginary home(s) that the wall of objects represents.<sup>52</sup> For just as the museum experience may help to interpolate visitors as national citizens, the museum ritual also delineates who is *not* a citizen. As Carol Duncan states, “Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.”<sup>53</sup>

The danger of such historical erasures or critical silences in interpretations of the “Living at Home” gallery is the elision of the fact that these popular conceptions of *home*, as a site of privacy and security, has never really been a reality for many groups throughout American history. And as the historical timeline that spans the primary wall in *House & Home*’s penultimate gallery makes apparent, neither has there ever been uniform accessibility to adequate *housing*. For over a century the ideals of home ownership have been deeply entangled with segregation and systematic inequality. Repeatedly, attempts to address these racial and class-based inequalities within the housing market have been deflected and co-opted by the complex ideology of the “American Dream.”<sup>54</sup> Touching on key issues such as Indian removal, land grants, immigration policies, public and subsidized housing, urban segregation, and homelessness, the timeline documents the persistent effects of racial discrimination in housing and foregrounds the way these decisions and policies have profoundly impacted the design and appearance of the U.S. residential environment.

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<sup>52</sup> Kate Gregory and Andrea Witcomb, “Beyond Nostalgia: The role of affect in generating historical understanding at heritage sites,” in *Museum Revolutions: How Museums Change and Are Changed*, ed. Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (New York and London: Routledge), 268.

<sup>53</sup> Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

<sup>54</sup> See Elvin Wyly, C.S. Ponder, Pierson Nettling, Bosco Ho, Sophie Ellen Fung, Zachary Liebowitz, and Dan Hammel “New Racial Meanings of Housing in America,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (September 2012).

## Part II. “People like knowing that it’s there:” *House & Home*’s Historical Timeline



Fig. 5.10 Historical Timeline, © 2012 National Building Museum.

To possess one’s own home is the hope and ambition of almost every individual in our country, whether he lives in a hotel, apartment, or tenement. (...) Those immortal ballads, *Home Sweet Home*, *My Old Kentucky Home*, and *The Little Gray Home in the West*, were not written about tenements or apartments (...) they never sing songs about a pile of rent receipts.

~President Herbert Hoover, Address at Constitution Hall, December 2, 1931

Standing apart from the “feel-good fare” of the rest of the exhibition, the historical timeline, located two galleries away in the “Home Economics” section of *House & Home*, narrates American history through the lens of housing. This detailed chronological account brings together a selection of demographic photographs, maps, advertisements, legal and historical documents to illustrate the role that historical processes such as migration and immigration have had in shaping the contemporary residential built environment. This collection also makes apparent the intertwined role of the federal government, the mortgage industry, builders, landlords, and real

estate agents had in creating, promoting, and selling the *idea* of the American home as well as the structures themselves.

Just as cultural memory and systems of value are materialized in objects, they are also objectified in both the house itself and in the social/spatial project of housing. Like the household wares on display along the home-making wall, *houses*, those structures which Daniel Miller has labeled the “elephants of stuff,” are also important facets of material culture, as well as vital commodities in the political economy. If the wall of objects looks at what could be called the “assembled environment,” the timeline is concerned with the idea of the built environment, exploring more directly the roles that history and social institutions play in constituting the built environment. In fact, in considering the wall of domestic objects *alongside* the history of American housing as depicted in this timeline, it becomes clear, as Blunt and Dowling (2006) argue, that “home is not separated from public, political worlds but is constituted through them: the domestic is created through the extra-domestic and vice versa.”<sup>55</sup> In theory if not necessarily in practice, the timeline provides museum visitors an opportunity to make apparent these discrepancies between the nostalgic ideal and the actual experience of home for many Americans.

This gallery provides insight into those aspects of house and home in the national experience that are perhaps less heroic, nostalgic, and picturesque than the vision projected in the previous galleries of the exhibition such as the photographic collages in the first room, the hands-on building demonstration, stunning architectural models, and the sublime heap of stuff in room two, and the beautiful short films screened in the gallery room just prior to the timeline. Despite the important role of the timeline in the overall experience of the *House & Home* narrative, and despite the fact that this section may even work to expose and *critique* the mechanisms of nostalgia

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<sup>55</sup> Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home: Key Ideas in Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.



at play in previous galleries, it is troublesome that viewers may not engage this exhibit, not only because it is the least interactive and most text-heavy of the entire exhibition, but also because viewers may be somewhat exhausted or saturated after already having witnessed the “core experience” of the exhibition. I would like to revisit here the idea that despite the potential overlooking of exhibition section, as curator Leavitt remarked, “People like knowing that it’s there.”

This kind of self-assurance that the sheer existence of, rather than engagement with, the “Home Economics” gallery may be problematic since it is the only section within the *House & Home* that details, explicitly, the ways in which social forces such as racism, class segregation, industrial exploitation, have deeply impacted American residential architecture. This idea of taking pleasure in just the recognition of “knowing that it’s there,” might offer visitors a sense of having acknowledged and indeed participated in moral economy of the exhibit. Strangely, this kind of “polite recognition” ties in with the charge and function of the “Living at Home” gallery’s “sentimentality.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, just as the objects’ appeal to private and collective memory can overwhelm deeper investigations of the multiple histories embedded within the artifacts, so might the pleasure that visitors take in simply recognizing “that it’s there” also work to subsume any real investigation of the deeply problematic class-based and racialized histories depicted throughout the timeline. As June Howard reminds us, “Sentimentality is stigmatized, not only because it is associated with women, but because the ‘packaged’ quality of emotion that is so visibly a social construction is a distasteful reminder that the partition of public and private can never really separate them.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, despite the fact that, at first glance, curators of *House & Home* seem to

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<sup>56</sup> Note as well, perhaps, the connection between “polite recognition” or “feeling right” and June Howard’s acknowledgement, in *Publishing the Family*, of the ways in which “empathy is valorized as predictably as sentimentality is stigmatized” (230).

<sup>57</sup> Howard, “What is Sentimentality?,” 73.

separate ideas of house and home—quite literally, as we’ve seen, in the first two rooms of the exhibition—evidence of the *inseparability* of these ideas in contemporary discourse and thought, that is the fiction of a real distinction between public and private zones, is also embedded in the exhibition.

That the timeline gallery is perhaps too easily, or perhaps conveniently, overlooked is made most evident in a review in *The Examiner*, which omits the timeline completely from a description that details every other gallery within the exhibition. “At last,” the article exclaims, “Washington has a positive note about housing.”<sup>58</sup> To see *House & Home* simply as a “heart-warming” exhibit that “Celebrates...the history of the American dream,” as the article continues, is to dwell in a mythic national past. It is to ignore the fact that the “American Dream” of homeownership, once the cornerstone of a national identity that promised security and upward mobility, is, and always has been, deeply unstable. Further, the process of imagining home in this way, in terms of unchecked and enduring ideological meanings (home as a timeless private haven, home as marker of status or individual success) has broader social consequences. Rather than indexing the actual lived experiences of individuals and groups throughout history, the reproduction of these popular images of home has more to do with reinforcing those domestic myths on which many Americans depend for their sense of stability and permanence—myths about racial privilege, the moral superiority of the nuclear family, heteropatriarchal gender division, and essential class hierarchies. Again, on both individual and collective levels, the continual propagation of these normalized images and ideas works to reproduce and affirm these ideologies as well as the social institutions that embody them.

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<sup>58</sup> Marsha Dubrow. “Housing Exhibit Mixes Homey with History at the National Building Museum,” *The Examiner*, April 27, 2012.

In the case of housing, as the timeline aims to show, there are multiple institutions involved in the construction of both houses and their meanings: the very powerful cultural institution of home ownership; the private, political-economic institutions of the construction and mortgage finance industries whose profitability depends on increasing markets for home ownership; and the public institutions of government whose only real goal in housing policy has been the ongoing endorsement of home ownership for the majority of families within the context of the existing private structure that supplies and finances housing. To paraphrase Robert Rakoff (1977), who writes over three decades before the 2008 bursting of the American “housing bubble,” as long as this dialectic of “authoritative institutional activity” and “ideological meaning-constitution” remains unchallenged, there can be no real changes in how we build or even think about American domestic and residential space.<sup>59</sup> Rakoff’s appeal here, that recognizing the operations of power which get materialized in the built environment and in the public issue of housing is crucial in order to initiate any kind of social change, can be just as aptly applied to what I referred to above as the “assembled environment” of the domestic interior along with the attendant and largely unattainable ideal of “home” in general.

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<sup>59</sup> Here, I am paraphrasing Robert M. Rakoff, “Ideology and the Meaning of the House,” *Politics & Society* 7 (1977): 85-104. In this essay, Rakoff looks at the role of ideology in the construction or reality in everyday life. With an ethnographic approach that draws from Clifford Geertz and an analytical approach that draws from Marx’s theory of alienation in capitalist society, he argues that Americans attempt to resolve many of the “shared problems of meaning central to our culture” through the symbol and reality of the house. And these existential problems of meaning, he argues, are rooted in the nation’s basic political-economic institutions. Of particular interest to me is the strand of his multi-pronged argument that suggests that it is through *home ownership* that people, “attempt to resolve, often unsuccessfully, both the existential conflicts that the house symbolizes as well as the ambiguities [people associate with] of private space” (86). In more contemporary work, David Harvey has made similar arguments about reframing the ways in which we think about housing in the light of the contemporary housing crisis as well as in the context of the recent “Occupy” movement. See *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2013).

## Conclusion:

Consider once more the above-quoted review of the National Building Museum's *House & Home* exhibition from *The Atlantic*: "The museum's depiction of what we do *inside* these private places is sentimental and random and amusing [...] the meatier stuff - the history of the modern American mortgage - is also on display." This chapter argues that to engage these objects solely as vessels of passive recollection, as "sentimental" rather than "meaty," without "historicizing the nature of those distinctions themselves," as June Howard demands, is to legitimize rather than challenge the social institutions that created, and benefit from, these romantic images of the American home. Like cultural memory, emotions and affective responses are neither universal nor individual; they emerge from historically embedded constellations of power, identity, and mobility. Further, to consider the domestic objects in this way is also to suggest that the experience of "home" is a universal one that somehow transcends or eschews the boundaries of race, class, and gender. However, the fact that various individuals, in their confrontation with the objects in *House & Home* might project very different, overlapping, and often competing narratives and values onto these domestic items shows—very simply but very powerfully—that this is not so.

Indeed, rather than being this idealized and unified site which has historically been imagined as *separate* from, indeed a *respite* from public life—this kind of analysis shows that "home" has in fact always been a material manifestation of the same tensions, anxieties and negotiations that inform public or national space. Thus, to gloss over these important aspects of "home" within the National Building Museum's collection of its "representative" objects, and to fail to engage the historical timeline beyond "polite recognition" is to miss the transformative potential of the *House*

*& Home* exhibition as a whole. Worse, it is to imagine this unproblematic image of home to be part of some collective and sanitized version of the national past.

Within a month of the opening of the *House & Home* exhibition, it was recognized in *The Atlantic* as “the most ambitious exhibit the museum has ever staged,” and similarly in *Washingtonian* as “the National Building Museum’s most ambitious project to date.”<sup>60</sup> A less enthusiastic review in *The Architect’s Newspaper* concludes that “*House & Home* ends up being mastered by its own conceptual overreach,” the article reads, “The whole history of the American house—architectural, technological, social—is simply too much to fit into five rooms.”<sup>61</sup> Despite this reviewer’s difficulty in “form[ing] a meaningful connection between a Crock Pot and the Glass House, a model airplane and Mount Vernon,” it is nonetheless very important to tell these stories together, and to understand *why* such representation is difficult, why so much conceptual weight has been siphoned into one word.

I believe that in part, rather than indexing the “conceptual overreach” of the exhibit, the fact that home cannot be depicted as neatly as this reviewer would like may point instead to the semantic excess within “home” itself: the multiplicity of forms and ideas which have woven themselves into the word. Again, I wish to emphasize the value of “home” through the framework of Raymond William’s *Keywords*. William’s approach is informative here because of its concern with “how successive developments in word meaning form layers and strata in the historical record,” and because of the way this work highlights the “variation and conflict created by

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<sup>60</sup> Emily Badger, “The Evolution of the American Dream, from Colonial Times to Today,” *The Atlantic Cities*, April 30, 2012 and Kathleen Bridges, “*House & Home* at the National Building Museum,” *Washingtonian*, April 27, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Amanda Kolson Hurley, “Review: Domestic Dissonance,” *The Architect’s Newspaper*, May 29, 2012.

interactions between different senses of such words in present day usage.”<sup>62</sup> If we are to understand “home” in this way, then, we must consider the meaning of the word on its own, but we must also consider its intricate relationship with other, similarly freighted words, such as “house,” for example, or “family,” “sentimentality,” “privacy.” When these words are conflated or confused, Alan Durant cautions, “you won’t grasp the historical development or current arguments.”<sup>63</sup>

Remember that in the span of time between the conception of National Building Museum’s *House & Home* exhibition in 1997 and its final execution in 2012, a variety of factors influenced not only the shape and focus of the exhibition but also the very meaning and cultural currency of “home” itself. Beyond the local or institutional shifts (changes in museum administration/staff, competing curatorial visions, funding and budget issues, etc.), this nearly two decade long interval also witnessed large-scale political and cultural shifts: Of course, 9/11 and its aftermath (initiating a global “war on terror”), the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the election and re-election of the nation’s first black president, and multiple significant natural disasters, to name a few. Most significant, however, is the fact that during the long period in which the exhibition was being conceived and designed, the United States witnessed a massive financial crisis of which the issue of the American home was (and is) at the very center. That all of these historical, and even conceptual, transitions have impacted the shape and experience of *House & Home* boldly affirms the fact that even though museum exhibitions may generate “a spectacle of experience that is false and imaginary,” as Kevin Hetherington writes, they also hold within them the power to unsettle and challenge these effects. For “as the times change, museums often do not, or they change at a

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<sup>62</sup> Silvia Adamson and Alan Durant, “Four Ways of Looking at a Keyword, Introduction,” *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Spring 2007): 1-5.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Durant, “Raymond Williams’ Keywords: Investigating Meanings ‘offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed,’” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2006): 11.

slower pace. This can unsettle their own narratives from within and thereby their own conditions of possibility. As their once optimistic narratives of progress and civilization come to be read as narratives of Empire and racism, we see the outmoded speak in unanticipated ways.”<sup>64</sup>

One of the thematic thrusts of this chapter is rather a claim: If visitors’ personal and emotional engagement is part and parcel of museum exhibitions, particularly those having to do with history or heritage, then institutions should actively consider not only their role in creating these responses, but also how they might then productively *mobilize* these “affective energies” in order to produce new modes of historical understanding on the part of their audiences. The project of recognizing, historicizing, and critiquing the powerful role of emotion within national exhibitions is crucial given that the production and circulation of sentiment and affects is central in articulating who comes to be included and excluded in national space. Indeed, as Mike Crang and Divya Tolia-Kelly have argued, the solicitation of these affective energies “has just as deep colonial and racial legacies as the collections of artifacts in the museums.”<sup>65</sup> In the National Building Museum’s *House & Home* exhibition, and, I would argue, in any project seeking to explore and represent the history of the home, the creation and mobilization of *nostalgia* is a pertinent example, and its evocation is evident given the descriptions of and responses to the wall of domestic objects within the exhibit.

As this chapter also argues, even though the “Home Economics” gallery perhaps *could* work to expose and critique this knee-jerk sentimentality that frequently emerges from romantic images of home and the domestic interior, insofar some visitors’ engagement with the timeline might be characterized by a “polite recognition,” it appears that any real investigation of the racialized, class-

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<sup>64</sup> Kevin Hetherington, “Museums,” 602.

<sup>65</sup> Mike Crang and Divya Tolia-Kelly, “Affect: An Ethnocentric Encounter? Exploring the ‘Universalist’ Imperative of Emotional/Affectual Geographies,” *Area*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2006): 213.

based, and otherwise exclusionary histories depicted throughout the timeline are subsumed by the more “feel-good” components of the exhibition.

Home, of course, is a tricky thing, with an ambiguous connection to ideas of belonging, and individual and collective identity. While the idea of home continues to embody a nostalgic longing for some fantasy of security and self-realization, it is important to recognize that even this longing itself is bought at the expense of women and multiple historically marginalized groups.<sup>66</sup> As Alan Trachtenberg writes: “Today images of well-accounted family places and domestic communities shaped by absolute gender roles and sanctioned by sentiment seem outlandishly retrograde, unacceptably patriarchal, and embarrassingly naïve.” And yet, he asks, “does not a residue of such sentiment persist in our cultural memory of imagined havens of warmth, shelters against the storm? Is it possible to think about what “home” means without succumbing in some degree to nostalgia for the once sanctified bourgeois family of European and American cities?”<sup>67</sup> The question remains, and it haunts each chapter of this project: how can we address the cultural memory of home, along with its present and future, in such a way that popular modes of nostalgia or sentimentality do not define or dilute the experience or representation? Or, if this is not possible, or perhaps even not desirable, how might curators, scholars, artists, etc., use nostalgia as an interpretive tool, perhaps even as they reproduce it?

If “sentiment” inadvertently overwhelms a broader critical approach to the *House & Home* exhibit, or if viewers tend to gloss over some of the social realities that are left out of popular narratives of home, perhaps they would have done well to visit the first floor of the museum, where, at the time of my fellowship at the museum in Fall 2012, there were two small photography

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<sup>66</sup> See Iris Marion Young, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme,” *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism* (2002).

<sup>67</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, “Introduction,” *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1991): 211-12.



exhibitions, each depicting the evolving and devolving city of Detroit: “Detroit Disassembled,” by Andrew Moore; and “Detroit is No Dry Bones,” by Jose Camilo Vergara. Although there is much to say about these exhibits, and about complicated issues surrounding sensationalist representations of Detroit in general, it’s “urban decay” in particular, for my purposes here I wish only to underscore how the images might work as a counter to the massive *House & Home* exhibit upstairs by defamiliarizing, and perhaps demythologizing the romantic idea of the “American” home. Considering that Wayne County, Michigan is the nation's largest urban area with the highest concentration of mortgage denial rates and deep subprime market penetration, as well as the fact that African Americans were far more likely to be pushed into subprime loans than whites with similar incomes, several of the images depicting domestic structures, segregated neighborhoods, and creatively repurposed land, can make plain some of the continuing issues that are given only a temporally-isolated mark on *House & Home*’s historical timeline. Further, images such as Andrew Moore’s “House On Walden Street” (fig. 5.11), which depicts a house almost completely taken over by the earth, offers a stark contrast to the romantic image of the house as a site of security and comfort.<sup>68</sup> In this image, for example, the “thingness” of the house, susceptible to natural forces and wrested from its cultural associations of security and comfort, is made uncannily present.

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<sup>68</sup> This image is also featured in Andrew Moore’s book of the same name, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron, Ohio: Akron Art Museum, 2010).



Fig. 5.11 “House on Walden Street,” Photograph by Andrew Moore (2008).  
Printed with permission by artist.

### *Afterward*

Just days after the official opening of the *House & Home* exhibition, four blocks from the National Building Museum in Washington D.C., thousands of realtors from across the country convened on the National Mall—a space of symbolic national inclusion—in order to ensure that legislators and policymakers protect this noble institution of homeownership. The demonstration was called “Rally to Protect the American Dream.” One woman in attendance, a young realtor from upstate New York, journeyed to the capital to support the extension of the Mortgage Debt Relief Act. In an interview, she made a plea for Congress to stop penalizing home ownership. “Stop trying to turn us into a rental nation!” she demanded; a plea that highlights the sociospatial

link between good citizenship and homeownership on the one hand and failed or weak citizenship and renting on the other.<sup>69</sup>

A month later, in early June of 2012, the National Association of Realtors (NAR), the same organization spearheading the rally, released a public advocacy campaign on national television, entitled “Moving Pictures,” which is part of a series of television and radio ads aiming to depict home ownership as seen through a child’s eyes. As the commercial opens, a young girl, with pigtails wrapped in ribbons, is contently coloring in the bright spacious living room of an upper-middle class white family. Above the cheerful music, the voiceover begins: “When you’re a kid,” intones a deep, authoritative voice, “you don’t know much about housing markets. You don’t know that home ownership builds communities. And you *certainly* don’t know that owning a home contributes to higher self-esteem and better test scores. You just know that home is where you belong.” After a wholesome family montage depicting backyard games of catch, and homework at the kitchen table, the spot concludes: “The National Association of Realtors wants you to know that home ownership matters: to our families, our neighborhoods, and our country.”

The young woman’s impassioned response at the Realtor’s Rally is obviously a reflection of her frustration as a realtor working in an increasingly rental-based housing market. Yet, in speaking at a rally that links ownership to protecting “the American Dream,” along with the implied “us” (homeowners, *Americans*) and “them” (renters, *Others*) within her statement, ignores the very forces that created the country’s housing and financial crisis and forced millions of homeowners into the rental market: risky lending and mortgage fraud, racism, corporate greed and irresponsibility.

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<sup>69</sup> Brian Summerfield, “In Defense of the American Dream,” *REALTOR Magazine* (May 2012). For a detailed history of such sentiments in which renting property is devalued as a poor substitute for achieving the American dream, see Lawrence J. Vale *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Along with the absurd and overly simplistic suggestion, in the NAR advertisement, that the children of homeowners are more confident and academically inclined than those of renters, these statements lay bare the exclusionary politics of housing in U.S. society and the role of the state in culturally, economically, and politically, maintaining the idea of homeownership as a key feature of white American citizenship and national belonging.

Finally, I return to Leavitt's image of *America's U-haul*. From within this framework, visitors of *House & Home* might view the curated objects as representing the detritus as well as the material treasures of a mythic, somehow unified, national family. At the same time, though, to highlight the evasive and fractured nature of those very notions of "home" and "family" that have just been evoked, we need only consider the ways in which this idea of packing and unpacking, of relocating and rebuilding, will likely resonate very differently for some "Americans," particularly for those whose homes are or have recently been foreclosed as a result of the 2007-2008 subprime mortgage crisis and its disastrous (and continuing) effects on the U.S. and global economy. For these and many others—poor or low-income tenants facing eviction, recent immigrants, or those displaced by natural disasters, to name only a few—domestic relocation has been a matter of exclusionary policies or legal force rather than individual choice.

The image of America's U-haul, here, is one that suggests a nation on the move, with "memories and relations that need to be faced," to return to Marcoux's metaphor of packing and unpacking. The image of movement in relation to domestic life does two things: First, it critically undermines the idea of home as a static, universal site that is somehow outside of history; Second, it opens up the possibility of moving away from rigid definitions of what "home" is or should be—formulations that have historically excluded many individuals and groups from its purview.

If we can begin to imagine “home” in terms of *both* memory and motion—as an evolving discourse rather than part of some collective and sanitized version of the national past—perhaps we can play a more active role in what the idea of home is, can, and will be by the time *House & Home* ends its run at the National Building Museum in 2017. I think it is especially useful to consider this possibility in light of the fact the meaning and experience of *both* ideas—of house and of home—were broken open and dramatically reorganized in the years leading up to the exhibition’s final opening in 2012. The concluding chapter of this project provides a brief glimpse of two creative sites that take on this important project of exposing the buried histories of “home” in order to re-imagine or reactivate its possibilities in the present.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion:

#### Of Rainbows and Polka Dots: Exposing and Rebuilding Home in Oz and Detroit

“Home” has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails.  
There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows anymore.

-Salman Rushdie, “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”

The house, to Gaston Bachelard, is a protective nest for our memories and dreams. Indeed, he insists, people “*need* houses in order to dream.”<sup>1</sup> For this poet-philosopher, the mythic image of the house, and the reveries of “home” that such images evoke, appears as something that is universal, eternal, ahistorical. As this project has repeatedly demonstrated, however, such an analysis neglects the fact that these images indeed have specific genealogies; they are borne of a specific time and place and are thus socially produced. In other words, the meanings of home and the cultural symbolisms affixed to the material structure of the house are discursive and in constant motion; they are both produced and sustained by national, political, and social institutions. This project suggests a way to envision how these ideas—the poetic charge of home along with the acknowledgment of its discursive construction—might productively come together. If we take for granted the fundamental instability of older ideas of home and place, such as those outlined by Bachelard, what possibilities might emerge from creative practices that mobilize this mythic image of the house to instead give voice to those very histories, experiences, and identifications that are otherwise excluded from home’s metanarratives?

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), viii.

I conclude this discussion with a brief look at two contemporary and innovative sites—in fiction and visual art—that take on this important project of exposing and disrupting the mythologies attached to the “American” home. The first is Geoff Ryman’s 1992 novel *Was*, an imaginative and troubling account of the “real” story of *The Wizard of Oz*. In his fictional “rewriting,” Ryman cleverly uses this near-universal cultural narrative to outline how specific bodies and histories come to be excluded from dominant versions of the national past. With this vision in mind, I then consider Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, an outdoor art project and space on Detroit’s east side which uses as its medium a stretch of abandoned houses as well as a huge assortment of discarded urban debris. Positioning house and home as sites of exploration and tension, each of these works sheds light on the immense gap between the ways ideas of home are represented and imagined in various avenues of expressive culture, and the ways they are actually experienced by those individuals and communities for whom these representations do not or cannot account.

### ***Geoff Ryman’s Was***

Time left you in another world where everything was different, even you. Memory held it together. So where was home?

-Geoff Ryman, *Was: A Novel*

Spanning over a century, Geoff Ryman’s 1992 novel, *Was*, tells the stories of three tragic characters, who are connected by their relationship to and experiences with *The Wizard of Oz*. First is the story of the “real” Dorothy Gael. It is 1875 and Dorothy, after losing her mother to diphtheria, is sent to Manhattan, Kansas to live, in abject poverty, with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. From here, Dorothy’s story is surely no fairytale; for it is within this surrogate home that

the young girl falls victim to brutal and repeated sexual assault by her uncle. And even though the community is well aware of this abuse, “It was revealed in every twisted movement, each bitter and angry smile, each horrifically knowledgeable look,” such things must remain invisible and unspoken in Ryman’s Kansas, since “nice people were not supposed to be able to recognize certain things, because they were supposed to be so untainted that they couldn’t even think about them.”<sup>2</sup> In a devastating scene early in the novel, Dorothy, who has been scorned by the community and made into a pariah, reveals this “secret” in a classroom led by a young substitute teacher, named Frank Baum. He is the only one who believes her. Unable to help, however, the substitute leaves town, appalled, but determined to write a fairytale in Dorothy’s honor in an attempt to construct a different childhood, if only in fiction, for a young girl from whom it had been so violently stolen.

Young Frank Baum is surely unable to even imagine the magnitude of the eventual popularity of his children’s book, and its ensuing success is what connects Dorothy’s childhood to that of a second character in Ryman’s novel, the child performer Frances Gumm who eventually adopts the stage name “Judy Garland” and plays Dorothy in the 1939 MGM film adaptation. When her father’s extramarital affairs with young men drive Frances and her family from their Eastern hometown they venture west towards Hollywood, where, as a child-star, Frances is exploited by her family and effectively stripped of both her earnings and her childhood. The novel’s third character, Jonathan, is a gay Canadian-born actor who, as a child, was obsessed with *The Wizard of Oz* books. When the MGM film adaptation, starring Frances Gumm/Judy Garland, made its television debut in 1956, Jonathan, then five years old, stays up late with his parents waiting in anticipation as his beloved book comes to life on the screen.

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<sup>2</sup> Geoff Ryman, *Was: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 207.



At the same moment, back in Kansas, the geriatric ward of a mental institution has also gathered in front of a new television set to watch the first national television broadcast of *The Wizard of Oz*. Among this group is an obstinate, half-crazy patient named “Dotty.” The reader soon learns that this is the disappeared Dorothy Gale. Not five minutes into the movie, recognizing its characters and plot, she is horrified by the gross misrepresentation of her past. “Who put this on,” she screams. “How’d it get there...That’s me. How did I get there? They got it wrong!”<sup>3</sup> A young nurse named Bill Davidson escorts Dotty out of the room, and witnessing the woman’s genuine terror and also finding plausibility in some of her ranting, he comes to discover that Dotty, “Old Dynamite” as she is called by the staff, is indeed Dorothy Gale of Kansas. He leaves the home shortly after to become a psychiatrist. In the opening pages of the novel, the year is 1989 and Jonathan, now an adult, is dying of AIDS. Accompanied by his psychiatrist, (the now middle-aged Bill Davison), he has just traveled from Los Angeles to Kansas. Gripped by the final stages of his illness, he is on a desperate quest to find the old farmhouse of the “real” Dorothy in an attempt to trace and acknowledge her past *as it really was*.

As this brief summary of Ryman’s complex novel suggests, each of his characters are marked not only by disappointing and traumatic childhoods, but they are also connected by the fact that “home,” as well as their own bodies, is the scene and site of these transgressions: Dorothy’s sexual abuse, Jonathan’s debilitating and intensely stigmatized disease, and Frances Gumm/Judy Garland’s Hollywood exploitation, infantilization, and eventual drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>4</sup> Just as the “real” story of Ryman’s Dorothy is silenced, appropriated, and distorted, first by

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Ryman, *Was*, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Garland’s “infantilization” here refers to the fact that in the MGM *Oz*, which catapulted her into fame (in reality as well as in Ryman’s novel), she was constricted both by her role and her wardrobe; her sixteen-year-old body contorted and confined in order to fit into the costume of a seven-year old girl (see

Baum and then by Hollywood, so too are the stories, desires, and bodies of each of these non-normative characters repressed, incompatible with, and thus rendered illegible in “official” narratives of national and historical progress. Showing how the Oz narrative continues to be referenced, revered, and reimagined, Geoff Ryman treats this beloved American text as a historical document and an object of historical knowledge. In doing so, Ryman’s text works to dislodge the fantasy of Oz from the unchallenged and nostalgic visions of home to which it has been so powerfully fused.

### *The Heidelberg Project*

The preservation or construction of a sense of place is an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future. This is, one suspects, why so many people locate the possibility of politics in actual places.

-David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*

Pioneered by Detroit native Tyree Guyton, the Heidelberg Project is a nonprofit art exhibit consisting of painted houses and found-object sculptures that take up two city blocks in what was once one of Detroit’s most violent neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> Though it is in a constant cycle of evolution and demolition, the project began in earnest in 1986 when lifelong Detroit resident Guyton returned home from the Army and made the decision to remain in Detroit rather than flee to the suburban periphery, as did much of the city’s population in the wake of the racial tensions, the closing of industries, and the economic recession of the previous several decades. Even though, as

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Culver, “Mankins,” 99). For a closer reading on the ways in which *Was* challenges the “historical narratives of (US) Western expansion,” see especially Susan Knabe, “History and Aids in *Was* and Angels in America,” *Extrapolation* Vol. 49, No. 2 (2008): 229. See also: Wendy Pearson, “The Pervert’s Guide to Geoff Ryman: Desire, Subjectivity and Identity in *Lust* and *Was*,” *Extrapolation* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 299; and Steffen Hantke, “‘There’s No Place Like Home’: Geoff Ryman’s *Was* and Turner’s Myth of National Childhood,” *49th Parallel: An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies* 4 (2000).

<sup>5</sup> For a history of the project, its mission statement, and current news, see: [www.heidelberg.org](http://www.heidelberg.org)

historians have detailed, the deindustrialization and depopulation of Detroit began in the decades preceding the 1967 riot/rebellion, a prominent and deeply racialized discourse locates Detroit’s “decline” in the supposed excesses of mid-century liberalism.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the proliferation of regional and national narratives naming Detroit a “disappearing city,” Guyton’s work testifies to the continuing spirit, and indeed the *presence*, of the city and its people.



**Fig. 6.1: Polka Dot House.** The Heidelberg Project’s signature spray-painted polka dots cover the windows and porches of its houses. They also spill out onto its sidewalks and streets, onto the trunks of trees, and throughout surrounding yards and vacant lots. Photo by author.

A vibrant cultural and tourist attraction that has garnered international acclaim, the Heidelberg has also been, since in its inception, a source of controversy and unrest amongst both Detroit residents and its municipal government. Some local detractors maintain that the project is

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<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

a fire and safety hazard, as well as an embarrassing eyesore, more trash heap than “art.” In addition, keeping in mind that not all the houses on Heidelberg Street are abandoned, for some of its residents, the steady flock of tourists and visitors feels like an invasion in which their property and their private lives become simply another part of the display.<sup>7</sup> Since May 2013, there have been at least eight reported cases of arson aimed at Heidelberg—four of its seven main houses have burnt to the ground.<sup>8</sup> The city itself has an even more contentious relationship with Guyton and Heidelberg, ordering its partial demolition on three occasions since its inception—in 1989, 1991, and 1999. Fueling the city’s vehement opposition to Guyton’s art is the fact that, despite its playfulness and the positive community-building activities it encourages, the Heidelberg Project is also a pointed commentary on the decades of disregard and mismanagement of postindustrial Detroit. As Detroit activist and critic Jerry Herron writes, the Heidelberg project “mocks the failure of the historical city to conserve either objects or people.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy surrounding the work, the Heidelberg Project *demand*s visibility and it opens up important dialogues about the city’s past, present, and future. In doing so, this act of making visible a single Detroit neighborhood—as a living, lived-in, and socially produced space—forces a reframing of the dominant discourses that are used to construct the city’s image in the collective national imagination. Indeed, as many critics have forcefully argued, in the mainstream media Detroit often becomes a symbol not only of national

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy Walters, “Turning the Neighborhood inside Out: Imagining a New Detroit in Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project” *TDR: The Drama Review* (2001) 64-93.

<sup>8</sup> On the Heidelberg’s recent arson attacks as well as the property-tax issues that also threaten the project’s future, see Keith Matheny and Tammy Stables Battaglia, “What now for Heidelberg, as it battles fires and tax problems,” *Detroit Free Press* (December 29, 2013); Anna Clark, “Detroit is burning: Mysterious arson fires plague renowned public art project,” *U.S. News* (December 18, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Herron, *Afterculture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 201.

economic failure, but also of racialized social dysfunction and moral decay. Imagined in this way, as either wasteland or wilderness, this politicized rhetoric constructs Detroit as an *empty* space—empty of people, of order, of money, and of meaning.<sup>10</sup> Many artists, journalists, and photographers, for example, revel in the aesthetic potential of the city as a landscape of “ruins,” drawn to the ghostly presence of its abandoned buildings and desolate neighborhoods, often depicting dejected monuments in the melancholic light of their former greatness.<sup>11</sup> Further, the film industry has long used the city/trope of Detroit as a warning call, and as a backdrop for some dystopian postindustrial future-world.<sup>12</sup> What results from this pervasive rhetoric of decline and dereliction that have come to define Detroit in the national imagination is that the discourses themselves have become both spatialized and racialized: They are attributed to the place and its people rather than to the power dynamics of capitalism and the structural forces of racism and exploitation that underlie these processes, such as continuing discrimination in, and unequal access to, housing, education, employment, transportation, and legal protection. What is more,

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<sup>10</sup> On the problematic discourse of Detroit’s “emptiness,” see especially David Sheridan, “Making Sense of Detroit” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38, no. 3 (1999): 321-323.

<sup>11</sup> The writing and photography of Jose Camilo Vergara (whose 2012 exhibit “Detroit is No Dry Bones” was featured at the National Building Museum, see Chapter Four) is frequently cited as being emblematic of this discourse on “ruins.” In privileging and aestheticizing a discourse of Detroit’s past and potential future, such representation refuses to acknowledge the present life of the city and its residents. In an April 1995 issue of *Metropolis* magazine, for example, Vergara notoriously outlined an extensive plan for *not* rebuilding Detroit’s downtown: “I propose that as a tonic for our imagination, as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory, a dozen city blocks of pre-Depression skyscrapers be stabilized and left standing as ruins: an American Acropolis” (cited in Herron, 2001, p. 35). For detailed critique on how this language of decay pervades, and ultimately dooms, top down urban renewal projects, see Valerie Kinloch, “The Heidelberg Art Project as a Site of Literacy Activities and Urban Renewal Efforts: Implications for Composition Studies” *JAC* 25, no. 1 (2005): 101-29. “The persistence to fortify inner city communities is not a direct result of poverty and illiteracy,” writes Kinloch, “but of the language used to talk about, characterize, and theorize the false and dislocated urban reality of cities.”

<sup>12</sup> On these filmic representations, see for example: George Steinmetz, “Detroit: A Tale of Two Crises,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 27, No. 5 (2009): 762; and Gary Kun Chan “(Re)Imagined Futures of Detroit: Dystopian and Utopian Views of the Motor City’s Future,” *Intersect*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011): 57-66. See also [www.detroitthefilm.com](http://www.detroitthefilm.com).

those discourses that depict the city as *empty* and without present value, work to erase the histories and actual material existence of Detroit's nearly one million current residents, those who *are* there, negotiating these legacies and living every day within the city limits.

Guyton's Heidelberg Project, in part, confronts and refuses this kind of erasure. The reclaimed objects that make up the Heidelberg Project—not only the buildings, but the piles of bicycles, shoes, toys, vacuum cleaners, stuffed animals, dolls, tires, vinyl records, and car hoods that have been harvested from the city's streets and brought to Heidelberg—depict both failure and promise, death and rebirth. The re-inscribing of value onto these once-discarded items performs the symbolic process of giving meaning and life back to that which has been discarded, left behind, forgotten. At the same time, despite its themes of vibrant color and regeneration, many of Heidelberg's installations call attention to deep histories of violence and human exploitation both within and beyond Detroit and the United States. Firstly, the long-vacant houses that are part of Guyton's canvas, for example, become symbols not of a democratic "American Dream"—characterized by the attainment of a prosperous private home—but rather of its failure and inaccessibility for many Detroiters. In addition, the majority of the project's present and past houses and installations (again, some have been destroyed by fire or demolition) are politically driven, with many drawing attention to racially-charged historical events. Inspired by his late grandfather's stories about the lynching of African-American slaves, in the piece entitled "The Souls of the Most High," for example, hundreds of old shoes hang by their laces from high branches of a single tree. Another piece, "The Oven," consisting of an abandoned stove inside of which are piled dozens of old shoes, is meant to memorialize those that suffered in the Holocaust. Other parts of the project frame contemporary issues plaguing Detroit. Forming a single line in the



space between the sidewalk and the grass, for example, “A Lot of Shoes” symbolizes the city’s high rates of unemployment and homelessness. Emerging out of the grass in one of Heidelberg’s lawns is a bright pink partially buried car frame (Fig. 6.2), a nod to the fall of Detroit’s auto industry. A memorial at the end of Heidelberg Street stands as a public tribute to local victims of gun violence. Taken as a whole, the installation urges visitors to make a connection between such acts of violence and erasure and to warn against seeing Detroit’s present situation in historical or geographical isolation.



Figure 6.2: Pink Car. Representing the fall of Detroit’s auto industry, an empty pink car frame is partially buried in the ground in one of Heidelberg’s once-neglected lots. Photo by author.





Figure 6.3: “Noah’s Ark.” Photo by author.

In comparing the different ways “outsider” and native writers have depicted the city of Detroit in their work, scholar David Sheridan explores the use of what he terms the “poetic imagination” as a way to faithfully represent and potentially transform the present reality of the city. This representational mode is privileged because it relies neither on nostalgic claims for a return to Detroit’s previous “greatness” (a reactionary gesture that privileges a single, fictional



version of the past at the exclusion of many others), nor does it impose a “proscription of the present in favor of the future” (an unfortunate consequence of “blank slate” narratives which depict Detroit, Sheridan explains, as “a culturally empty space waiting to be inscribed with the future.”) Rather, he explains, poetic fantasy functions in these works as a “strategy for how one will survive in the present, despite the pain and suffering.”<sup>13</sup> At the heart of Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, as well as Geoff Ryman’s novel *Was*, is the knowledge that in order to confront or “survive” the present, we must first re-member the past in a way that makes visible those bodies, stories, and identifications that continue to be erased in the telling of it. In thinking about this process of reclaiming narratives along with Sheridan’s discussion of the strategic uses of *fantasy*, I will return briefly to a culminating scene in Geoff Ryman’s *Was*.

Shortly after her traumatic collapse in the classroom, Ryman’s “real” Dorothy determinedly walks away from the home and community that discarded her. In the middle of a Kansas field not long into her journey, a blinding storm hurls the young girl into a barbed wire fence and then pulls her into the eye of a cyclone. Here, in the twister’s embrace, everything becomes silent “as if something had popped,” and Dorothy has visions of some forgotten world: she hears Indians singing in the distance, and long-extinct white buffalo graze all around her. It is here, in the dreamworld of the cyclone, that Dorothy, walking backwards through time and space, is able to uncover and recreate the story of her past. As with Sheridan’s discussion of the “poetic imagination as a means for transforming the present,” this fictional act of recovery for Ryman’s

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<sup>13</sup> David Sheridan, “Making Sense of Detroit,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* Vol. 38, No. 3 (1999): 321-323.

Dorothy is indeed vital for her survival as a stable subject.<sup>14</sup> In this imaginative re-memory, Dorothy begins to reconstruct the home of her pre-Kansas childhood:

She smelled the hallway. There was the wooden table with the vase of dried flowers and the umbrella rack. There were the beat-up old shoes of the woman who cleaned and lived downstairs. (...) There was the black dresser with the cups with the gold edges and the dancing china pony on the piano, and the Nativity in the window, the china figures, the china manger. (...) Dorothy knew all of those things as if they had never gone, as if all she had to do was come here on a visit and find them there, solid, to be used.<sup>15</sup>

Dorothy is thus grounded, *rescued*, by these prosthetic images of her childhood home and its objects. But, as her father heartbreakingly reminds her at the end of this dream, she cannot remain in this fantasy. “This is just a memory (...) Here and then gone,” he explains, “But you have to remember, to have a heart, to have a brain. You have to remember in order to be brave.” And before she is transported back to the present, her mother kisses her forehead: “But all you’ve got...is now.” In this moment, Ryman’s troubled protagonist—who was first made invisible by the non-acknowledgement of her traumatic childhood then by L. Frank Baum’s immensely popular but false representation of her story—re-remembers the past so that she can survive in, and potentially transform, the present.

In the epilogue to *Was*, Ryman describes his relationship to *The Wizard of Oz* as well as his interest in the literary modes of realism and fantasy. “I fell in love with realism,” he writes,

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<sup>14</sup> Without such spatial memories, suggests Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, one would be a “dispersed being.” He writes: “I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another. In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being” (6).

<sup>15</sup> Geoff Ryman, *Was*, 358.

“because it deflates the myths, the unexamined ideas of fantasy. It confronts them with forgotten facts. It uses past truth—history.”

Oz is, after all, only a place with flowers and birds and rivers and hills. Everything is alive there, as it is here if we care to see it. Tomorrow, we could all decide to live in a place not much different from Oz. We don't. We continue to make the world an ugly, even murderous place, for reasons we do not understand.

These reasons lie in both fantasy and history. Where we are gripped by history—our own personal history, our country's history. Where we are deluded by fantasy—our own fantasy, our country's fantasy. It is necessary to distinguish between history and fantasy wherever possible.

And then use them against each other.<sup>16</sup>

Oz becomes a utopian and reparative site in Ryman's novel, a symbol of what the nation *could* become in spite of its violent histories and misremembered pasts. In reflecting on the MGM film and Oz's serial adaptation, scholar Jack Zipes offers a similar reading: “[Baum's] Oz was resurrected out of the misery of the 1930s, an alternate vision of America, a *mirror that reflected America's disgrace and promise*.”<sup>17</sup> In this context, we might consider the fantasy world constructed within Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project as a kind of Oz correlate. Whereas Ryman's novel sheds light on specific bodies and stories that have been excluded from dominant versions of national history, those objects, structures, and sculptures that form the Heidelberg Project perform a similar function. The loud and living display disrupts the pervasive rhetoric of decline and dysfunction that, in creating a mythic Detroit in the popular imagination, also circumscribes its possibilities in the present. Ultimately, it is in challenging and re-imagining representations of space and its material realities—in the *re-scripting of house and home*—that both expressive sites perform this important cultural work.

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<sup>16</sup> Geoff Ryman, *Was*, 369.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 138.

## Coda

A song lyric that was penned by playwright John Howard Payne in 1822, immortalized by L. Frank Baum in 1900, and has since become an oft-repeated sentimental staple in everyday language and culture, Dorothy's beloved refrain, "There's no place like home," is just one in a storehouse of similar clichés that reduces the complexity of home into a single meaning and image. However, as this work suggests, and as Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat succinctly explain: "In the repeated mutual impacting of divergent trajectories, claims, and memories that constitute the landscape of late capitalism, the loss of home and the struggle to reclaim and reimagine it are experiences fraught with tension."<sup>18</sup> Beginning and ending with two national exhibits over a century apart—the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 2012 *House & Home* Exhibit at the National Building Museum in Washington D.C.—this project explores how the conundrum of house and home comes to be represented, reproduced, and performed in cultural forms like literature and art, advertising and film, artifacts and commodities. In each of these avenues I focus as well on the powerful role of narrative, those stories we tell, and are told, in order to make sense of the world and our place in it. In demonstrating how narratives of personal memory and public history are embodied in and produced by objects and texts, each part of this project also aims to show the importance of challenging these stories, and of seeking and creating new ones.

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<sup>18</sup> Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2.

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